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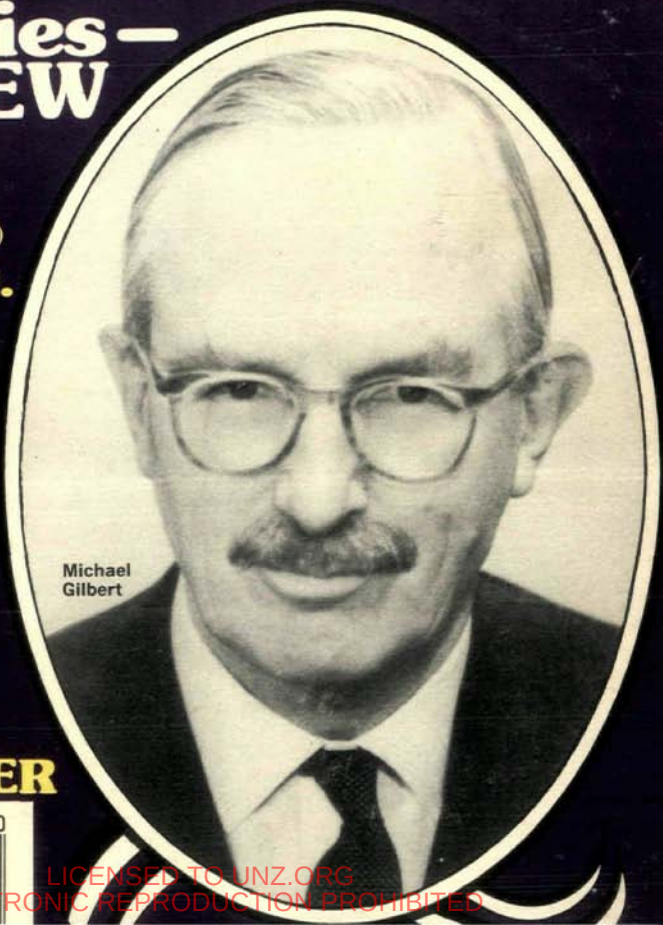

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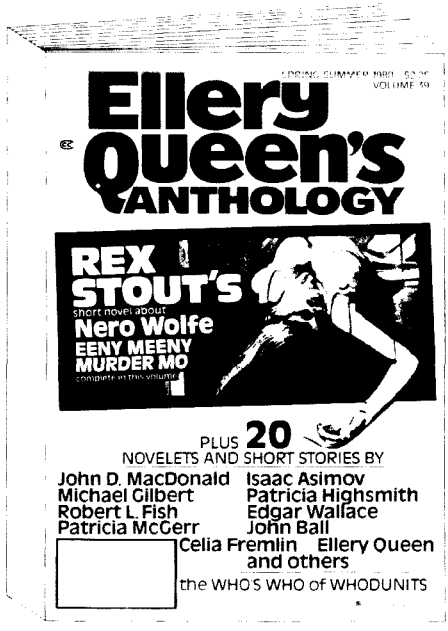


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a *NEW* Calder and Behrens story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

*Colonel Mounteagle, when his back was against the wall, would fight—you had only to look at his face to know that. During World War II he had been a member of a task force that blew up submarine pens, working against time, against minutes. Now his land—in the Mounteagle family for two hundred and fifty years—was threatened, and the Colonel was a tough, ruthless, and extremely dangerous antagonist . . . One of the best—perhaps the very best—of the Calder-Behrens adventures in suspense . . .*

# A SENSE OF HISTORY

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"You are my member," said Colonel Mounteagle.

"Indeed, yes," said Mr. Pocock, sipping nervously at the glass of sherry which the Colonel had thrust onto him when he arrived.

"You represent my interests in Parliament."

"Yours, and other people's."

"Never mind about other people. It isn't other people's land this feeder road is going to ruin. It's my land."

"That's one way of looking at it," agreed Mr. Pocock. "But you have to bear in mind that by taking the pressure off the road between your Lodge gates and the roundabout, a number of people with houses on that stretch will be relieved of the heavy flow of traffic just outside their front gates. Danger to children—"

"Irrelevant," said the Colonel. "People who buy houses on the main road must expect to see a bit of traffic. That's not the point. When a road is going to invade the privacy of a land owner—is going to trespass across *his* fields—he *must* be allowed some say in the matter. That's right, isn't it?"

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"Up to a point."

"Right. Have some more sherry." Without allowing Mr. Pocock to say "yes" or "no" he refilled his glass. "Now, you've got a chance to do what's needed. You've drawn a place—third place, I believe—in the ballot for private members' bills. I've told you what's wanted. A simple three- or four-clause bill saying that where a new road is planned the landowners affected by it will have a right to veto it. If there are several of them, the verdict to be by a straight majority. That's democratic, isn't it?"

"In a way," said Mr. Pocock. He wished he could dispose of the sherry, but if he drank it too quickly he was going to choke. "But one has to look at the other side of the coin. The new road will be a great benefit to a number of householders."

"Including you."

"Yes. It's true that my present house happens to be on that stretch of road. But I hope you don't impute—"

"I don't impute anything," said the Colonel. "I state facts. Mine is the only property which is going to be invaded, and that means that I am the only person directly concerned."

He gazed out of the window. From where he stood he could see, across two fields, the line of hedge which marked the main road—a thick hedge of well matured beech. What he now had to face was the thought of a road, a loathsome snake of tar macadam, giving right of access to every Tom, Dick, and Harry with a stinking motorcar or a roaring motorcycle, violating lands which had been in the Mounteagle family for two and a half centuries. Was it for this that they had fought Napoleon, Kaiser William, and Hitler, that one Mounteagle had fallen in the breach at Badajoz, and another in the sodden wastes of Passchendale, that he himself—?

He looked down at his left hand from which three of the middle fingers were gone. Mr. Pocock, not fancying the expression on his face, managed to swallow most of the sherry in his glass.

"It may not be easy to push such a bill through," said the Colonel. "But it's a chance. And maybe your last chance to settle this matter without bloodshed."

"Metaphorically, I hope you mean," said Mr. Pocock with a nervous smile.

"I'm not in the habit of talking in metaphors," said the Colonel. "If you put me with my back to wall, I shall fight."

"And, oh dear," said Mr. Pocock to his wife that evening, "I've got a feeling he meant it."

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"You can't possibly promote an anti-social bill of that sort."

"If I did, it would be the end of me, politically. And it wouldn't get a second reading. It would be laughed out of Parliament, and me with it."

"In that case," said his wife, "what's the difficulty? You just say no."

"You didn't see his face," said Mr. Pocock.

"When I was in India," said Mr. Fortescue, "there was a saying that all sappers were mad, married, or Methodist. Colonel Mounteagle is a bachelor, and a staunch upholder of the established church."

"So he must be mad," said Mr. Calder.

Mr. Fortescue was Manager of the Westminster branch of the London and Home Counties Bank; he had a number of other jobs as well. When he wished to make contact with Mr. Calder or Mr. Behrens, both of whom lived in Kent, he would convey a message to them that their accounts were causing him concern. The precise form of the message indicated the gravity of the situation. On this occasion it had been of very moderate urgency, and directed to Mr. Calder only.

"Madness is an imprecise term," said Mr. Fortescue. He steepled the tips of his fingers and looked severely at Mr. Calder over his glasses.

"If you mean, is he certifiably insane, the answer must be in the negative. But his conduct in recent months has been causing concern in certain quarters. A number of my people have, as you know, succeeded in establishing themselves in positions of some confidence in IRA cells in this country. One of my people has managed to become friendly with Michael Scullin."

Mr. Calder knew that the people referred to were very brave men who took their lives into their hands every day of the year. He also knew that the systematic penetration of IRA groups was one of the ways in which bomb outrages were kept within manageable limits.

He said, "Scullin? He's their electronics expert, isn't he?"

"One of them. He specializes in detonation by remote control, and devices of that sort. He learned his trade in Russia."

"I'm surprised that we don't take steps to abate him."

"On the whole it is more useful to keep him under observation. It can produce surprising results—as it has on this occasion. It seems that recently he has been paid substantial sums of money by a

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certain Colonel Mounteagle for what I can only describe as a refresher course in the use of high explosive."

"A refresher course?"

"Certainly. As a young officer, in 1945, Mounteagle had a considerable reputation. He was a member of the task force charged with clearing the mouth of the Scheldt, and blowing up the submarine pens. They were jobs which had to be done against time, and this involved the acceptance of risks. There was a procedure by which unmanned barges filled with explosive could be directed into the underground pens and exploded. The danger lay in the variety of underwater devices which had first to be brought to the surface and dismantled. It was while he was engaged in this work that the Colonel lost three fingers of his left hand—and gained an immediate D.S.O."

"He sounds quite a lad," said Mr. Calder. "Do we know what is leading him to a renewed interest in the forces of destruction?"

"He is annoyed with the authorities for wishing to build a road across his park and with his local M.P. for failing to introduce a private bill to stop them."

Mr. Calder thought for a moment that Mr. Fortescue was joking, then realized that he was serious. He said, "What sort of reprisals do you think he might be intending?"

"He could be laying a number of booby traps in his park. Alternatively, or in addition, he may be planning to blow up the M.P. concerned, a Mr. Pocock. Two nights ago Mr. Pocock was awakened by mysterious noises. He telephoned the police. When they arrived they found that the door of his garage had been forced. From the garage an unlocked door leads into the house."

"I see," said Mr. Calder. "The Colonel sounds like a determined character. Perhaps Mr. Pocock would be wise to press on with his bill."

Mr. Fortescue said, "I think we must take a hand. The loss of an occasional Member of Parliament may not be a matter of concern, but we don't want some innocent bulldozer driver destroyed. I suggest you make yourself known to the Colonel. His address is Mounteagle Hall, Higham. He is managing director of his own family firm, The Clipstone Sand and Gravel Company. It is on the river, north of Cooling. I will alert Behrens as to the position, but I imagine you will be able to handle this yourself."

Mr. Calder's methods were usually simple and straightforward.

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On this occasion he put on his oldest clothes, armed himself with a fishing rod, and sat down to fish at a point just outside the boundary fence of the Clipstone Sand and Gravel Company. Soon after he had started, a man came out of a gate in the fence and stood watching him. From his appearance and walk he was an ex-naval type, Mr. Calder guessed. At this moment he succeeded in hooking a sizable fish.

This served as a convenient introduction, and Mr. Calder was soon deep in conversation with Chief Petty Officer Seward. He mentioned that he was putting up for a few days at the local pub. Seward agreed that the beer there was drinkable, and that he might be down there himself after work.

By ten o'clock that evening, in the friendly atmosphere of the Saloon Bar, Mr. Calder learned a good deal about the Clipstone Sand and Gravel Company and its owner.

"He's all right," said Seward. "I mean, you don't find many like him nowadays. He knows what he wants, and he likes to get his own way, no messing about. But if he likes you, he'll do anything for you."

"And if he doesn't like you?"

"If he doesn't like you," said Seward with a grin, "you clear out quick. We had a chap once who set himself up as a sort of shop steward. Wanted to get us unionized. The Colonel soon put a stop to it."

"How did he manage to do that?"

"Threw him in the river."

"I see," said Calder thoughtfully.

"I don't say he would have got away with it in the usual outfit, but we're more a sort of family business. All ex-service. We've even got our own fleet."

Mr. Calder had seen the neat row of gray metal barges anchored to the jetty.

"Lovely jobs," said Seward. "Self-powered. One man can handle them easily. Built to ferry stuff ashore on the beaches at D-day. Picked them up from the Crown Agents after the war. Most of our stuff—sand and aggregate, that is—goes up by river. And they bring back timber piling and iron sheeting. When we're opening a new section of quarry we have to blanket off each section as we go—"

He expounded the intricacies of the quarryman's job, and Mr. Calder, who always liked to learn about other people's work, listened with interest.

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He said to Mr. Behrens when he met him three days later—"Mounteagle's a real buccaneer. The sort of man who used to go out to India in the seventeenth century and come back with a fortune and a hobnailed liver. But he's running a very useful outfit, and his men swear by him."

"Would he be capable of blowing up a Member of Parliament?" said Mr. Behrens.

"Think nothing of it. He chucked a shop steward into the river."

On the following Sunday Mr. Calder paid a visit, by appointment, to the modest villa residence of Alfred Pocock, M.P. It stood, with five similar residences, on the far side of the road which skirted Colonel Mounteagle's park. He found Mr. Pocock at home, alone and depressed. He said, "I've sent my wife away to stay with her mother. She didn't want to go but I thought it would be safer."

"Much safer," said Mr. Calder. "I take it the explosives experts have given your house a clean bill of health."

"They poked around with some sort of machine which reacts to explosives. They didn't find anything."

"I expect it was just a reconnaissance. The Colonel's a methodical man."

"He's a public menace," said Mr. Pocock indignantly. "I'm told that the workmen who should have started on the new road a week ago have refused to proceed without police protection."

"I'm not sure that policemen would be much use. What they need is a military reconnaissance screen, armed with mine detectors."

"Then the Colonel should be arrested."

"And charged with what?"

Mr. Pocock gobbled a bit, but could think of no answer to this. Mr. Calder said, "I suppose you couldn't make some sort of gesture. Have this bill he wants printed, and given a first reading. Since you're convinced it wouldn't get any further, no real harm would be done."

"It would be the end of my political life."

"If I had to make a choice between the ending of my political life and the ending of my life, I know which alternative I would select. But then, I'm a natural coward."

Mr. Pocock, his voice rising as it did when he was excited or alarmed, said, "It's a scandal. We should all be given the fullest possible protection against menaces of this sort. It's what we pay our rates and taxes for and we're entitled to expect it."

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"Having me on your side," said Mr. Calder, "is what you might call a tax bonus."

Mr. Pocock was not appeased. He shook hands coldly when his visitor left. Mr. Calder, also, was silent. He was reflecting that maybe the trouble with England was that it was run by people like Mr. Pocock and not by people like Colonel Mounteagle.

His next object was to meet the Colonel. Since he could hardly march up to the front door and introduce himself, this was a question of maneuver and good luck. He was early afoot on Monday morning and found two young men with white poles, a steel tape, and a theodolite on the road verge just south of the manor's great gates—high columns, each surmounted by a stone eagle poised to swoop.

As he stopped to talk to them a car swept out of the entrance. The Colonel, who was driving, spotted the men, pulled up, and got out. The men looked apprehensive. The Colonel was smiling. He said, "Getting ready for the great day, lads?"

"That's right, Colonel."

"The day when the first bulldozer drives through my hedge."

"That won't be us, Colonel. That's not our job."

"Someone's got to drive it. Can't do it by remote control." A thought struck him. "Come to think of it," he said, "when I was doing a similar sort of job during the war, we *did* use remote control. But that was ships, not bulldozers. No. As I said, someone will have to drive it." The Colonel's smile widened. "Give him a message from me, lads. What he'll need is not police protection. He'll need insurance for his widow."

The Colonel swung round and seemed to notice Mr. Calder for the first time. He said, "Are you in charge of this mob?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Calder. "I just happened to be passing."

"You don't look to me like someone who happened to be passing. You look to me like a spy. This is war. And you know what happens to spies in war." The smile appeared again. "They get shot."

It was the smile that convinced Mr. Calder. The Colonel was neither eccentric nor in any way admirable. Whether he was mad or not was a nice point. What was certain was that he was very dangerous.

"We put a tap on both telephones," said Mr. Fortescue. "The one from the house and the one from the factory. We picked up an interesting exchange yesterday afternoon. The Colonel was speak-

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ing to a young friend of his, also ex-Army, it seems. A man called David Cairns. Cairns is assistant manager at an open-cast coal site at Petheridge, above Reading. Their coal goes down by river to the power stations at Battersea and Rotherhithe."

"And the Colonel is ordering coal?"

"He is ordering explosives. A ton of slurry explosive. Stable, but extremely powerful. It is used in open-cast mining. And in quarrying."

"So the Colonel has a legitimate reason for ordering it?"

"Certainly. And used in small quantities, under careful control, it can be perfectly safe. When I asked one of our Home Office experts what the effect would be of detonating a ton of it, he said that no one in his senses would do such a thing. When I pressed him he said it would blow a crater, roughly the size of a football field, perhaps twenty foot deep."

Mr. Calder started to say, "Is there any reason to suppose—" but Mr. Fortescue interrupted him sharply. He said, "There were two further points. The Colonel is fetching this load himself. He will take one of the barges upstream tomorrow. A run of nine to ten hours. The loading will be done when he arrives. He has also ordered a quantity of timber, which will be stowed on top of the explosive. To keep it firmly in position, he said. No doubt a wise precaution. He plans to spend the night on the boat and start back early the following morning. I think it would be a good idea if you supervised the shipment. But I confess I shall feel much happier when the whole of this particular cargo is safely stowed in the explosives store of the Clipstone Sand and Gravel Company."

"Me, too," said Mr. Calder.

There was a jetty at Petheridge, connected by a private railway with the loading bay at the open-cast colliery. A concrete track ran alongside the line. The Colonel, who must have made an early start, tied up at the jetty at four o'clock. Mr. Calder, who had come by road and had not needed to hurry, was ensconced in a thicket of alder and nettles at the far end of the jetty.

He awaited developments with interest.

The timber arrived first, by rail. The explosive, packed in wooden boxes, followed in a lorry, driven by a youngish man with the stamp of a cavalry officer, whom the Colonel greeted as David, and whom Mr. Calder assumed to be Cairns.

The wooden boxes were man-handled by the train crew and low-

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ered into the barge. Nobody seemed unduly worried by their explosive potential, but Mr. Calder noticed that they were not treated roughly. Once they were safely stowed, a small crane was brought into operation and this was used to sling on board the timber baulks, which had evidently been cut to length and which fitted snugly over the boxes.

By the time the loading was finished, evening was closing in. The train clanked off, and the Colonel said something which Mr. Calder was too far away to hear but which seemed to be an invitation to Cairns to come on board. He had been squatting among the nettles for three hours without achieving anything except cramp. Nothing much would happen before the barge started downstream at first light. Mr. Calder's ideas turned to a drink and dinner. He got stiffly to his feet. He could see Cairns and the Colonel standing in the lighted bridge house. He eased his way along the jetty in the hope that he might pick up what they were saying.

What the Colonel was saying was, "I bet you don't know what this box of tricks does."

Cairns said, "You lose your bet, Colonel. Almost the only interesting thing I did in the army was the long electronics course I took at Rhyl. It's an automatic steerer. Come to think of it, that must have been the sort of thing you used when you were blowing up those submarine pens."

"Roughly the same apparatus," said the Colonel. "Roughly. But it was a good deal more primitive in those days."

If Cairns had noticed the expression on the Colonel's face, he might have cut short the conversation at this point. As it was, he had moved on to a second box that was beside the auto steerer and linked to it. Peering down at it he said, "This looks like a repeater. What would you need a repeater for?"

He put out one hand to touch the dial. The Colonel said, in the tone of voice he might have used to a recalcitrant subaltern, "Don't touch that."

Cairns's head jerked back. He seemed suddenly to realize that something was wrong.

He said, "Do you mean that this repeater's already set? What on earth are you playing at?"

"That's none of your business."

Cairns was getting angry too. He said, "It is my business. You've got enough of my explosive on this craft to blow a hole in the home countries. And you've got an automatic steerer linked to a pre-set

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repeater. Unless you're prepared to tell me what you're playing at, I think I ought to report this to the police."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said the Colonel calmly. "I'll have no Tresham here." His hand came out of his pocket with a gun in it.

Calder was close enough by now to hear this, but not close enough to stop what followed. His feet were on the gangplank when the Colonel shot Cairns through the heart, caught him as he fell, and heaved him over the side of the bridge and into the river. Hearing Mr. Calder coming up the iron steps onto the bridge he swung round and shot him, once in the head and once in the body, and threw him overboard as well.

Then he put the gun back into his pocket, turned about, and descended into the cuddy. He was breathing a little faster, but otherwise showed no particular sign of emotion. His hand, as he poured himself a whiskey from a bottle in the bulkhead cupboard, was steady as a rock.

The first shot had creased Mr. Calder, plowing a long furrow along the side of his head above the ear and rendering him temporarily unconscious. He had twisted as he fell, so that the second shot went into the right side of his chest, deflecting from the ribs and coming out under his right shoulder blade.

The fall into the chilly November waters of the Thames brought him round. He could use his legs, and with difficulty, his left arm. He realized that he was losing blood fast.

He let himself go with the current, kicking feebly toward the right bank, because he remembered that the towpath was on that side.

An eternity of cold and increasing pain.

Then he felt himself grounding on the gravel foreshore. Above him was a low wall of what seemed to be concrete sacks. He realized that he was incapable of climbing it and getting out onto the towpath.

He lay on his back and shouted.

The first passer-by was a young girl. She took one look down at Mr. Calder and scampered away. The next one, twenty interminable minutes later, was a policeman.

Mr. Behrens reached Reading Infirmary just before midnight. He was shown into a bleak reception office where he kicked his heels for ten minutes. His temper was wearing thin when a young doctor

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came in, accompanied by a policeman whom Mr. Behrens recognized—Superintendent Farr of the Reading police.

The Superintendent said, "As soon as we knew it was Calder we got in touch with your office. They said, put the silencers on. Have you any idea what this is all about?"

"Why don't we ask Calder? He might be able to tell us."

"He won't tell you anything," said the doctor. Then he noted the expression on Mr. Behrens' face.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that. He's not dead yet, and with a bit of luck we'll keep him that way. But he's lost a lot of blood. And lying about on the river bank in this weather can't have helped. I've put him under, and he'll have to stay that way for the time being."

"How long will that be?"

"The longer the better for him," said the doctor.

Mr. Behrens recognized the finality of this. He said to Farr, "Can *you* tell me anything? We're all of us totally in the dark. It may be important."

"All I can tell you is that one of my men found him, on the river bank, whistled up an ambulance, and got him in here. It was when they were going through his wallet that they found his 'I' card with the special instructions on it, and got hold of me."

"Did he say anything before you put him under? Anything at all?"

"Not really," said the doctor. "If I'd known it was going to matter I might have listened more carefully." Men who were brought in with two bullet wounds in them and were important enough to bring the head policeman round at midnight were something new in his experience. "He did mention two names, though—several times over. One was Cairns and the other, I think, was Tresham."

"Tresham?" said Mr. Fortescue thoughtfully, when Mr. Behrens spoke to him on the telephone. "I seem to remember a man of that name. Tresham or Trencham. He was a Norfolk fisherman. He gave a lot of help to German agents landing by submarine on the East Coast."

"And was Calder involved?"

"He was at Blenheim at the time. He could have been."

"Then this might have nothing to do with Mounteagle. It might be a revenge killing. By Tresham's son perhaps."

"I don't think," said Mr. Fortescue precisely, "that this is a case in which it would be wise to jump to conclusions. What about Cairns?"

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"He's a bachelor. We've telephoned his digs. No answer. The police are sending a car round."

Mr. Fortescue digested this news in silence for some seconds. Then he said, "I'll look into the Tresham case. And I'll arrange for the police to monitor Mounteagle's barge as it goes downstream tomorrow. There's a lot to do. I suggest you go home and get some sleep. Be at the Bank by nine tomorrow morning."

Mr. Behrens went back home to the Old Rectory in the sleepy Kentish village of Lamperdown, and he lay on his bed, but he did not go to sleep. The answer to a lot of their problems was under his hand, if only he could close his fingers on it.

The deceptive light of false dawn was in the sky, and the first cocks were beginning to crow across the valley when Mr. Behrens got up, pulled on his dressing gown, and made his way downstairs, walking quietly, so as not to wake his aunt, who shared the house with him and was a light sleeper.

He switched on the reading lamp in his study and searched the shelves for the book he wanted. In the end he found it among a complete set of the works of Charles Dickens.

"Are you suggesting," said Mr. Fortescue, "that Colonel Mounteagle intends to blow up the houses of Parliament?"

"That's right."

"And you found this in 'A Child's History of England'?"

"It was the only book I could lay my hand on quickly," said Mr. Behrens apologetically.

It was not yet six o'clock in the morning but Mr. Fortescue was dressed in the pinstripe trousers and black coat appropriate to a senior Bank official. Also he had shaved, which was more than Mr. Behrens had done. He turned his attention to the book and read it once again.

" '*Lord Mounteagle, Tresham's brother-in-law, was certain to be in the House; and when Tresham found that he could not prevail upon the rest to devise any means of sparing their friends, he wrote a mysterious letter to this Lord and left it at his lodging in the dusk, urging him to keep away from the opening of Parliament.*' So Tresham has nothing to do with our Norfolk fisherman?"

"Nothing at all. Tresham is probably something Calder heard the Colonel saying when he shot Cairns."

"Then you think Cairns is dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

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"The whole thing is unthinkable. Totally unthinkable. And yet—"

Now that he was getting used to it, Mr. Fortescue seemed to be finding the idea of the wholesale destruction of the legislature more interesting than shocking. "An outrageous idea. How would one set about it?"

"It's some sort of automatic pilot with a receiver at the other end to guide it."

"Then has something been planted in the House?"

"I fancy the receiver will be going there tonight. In Pocock's car. That would be what the Colonel was up to when Pocock heard burglars."

"How could he be certain that Pocock would be there tonight?"

"It's the debate on Common Market Finance. His pet subject. He'll be there early and stay late."

"Well, we can soon see if you're right. We'll call on Pocock. And we'll take Brackett with us. If he finds this gadget in Pocock's car, do you know, I shall be almost inclined to believe you."

"He could hardly have chosen a more appropriate day for it," said Mr. Behrens. The calendar on Mr. Fortescue's desk had not yet been turned from the previous day. It showed November 4th.

An hour later, as the milkman and the postman were delivering their wares, three men stood in Mr. Pocock's garage and watched the fourth at work. Major Brackett, who looked like a dyspeptic bloodhound and was the top electronics expert in the Ministry of Defence, was lying on his back under the car. He said, "It's here all right. Wired onto one of the cross-members. A very neat job."

He eased his way out, stood up, and wiped a drop of oil from his nose.

"That's all right then," said Mr. Fortescue. "All we have to do is switch it off." And when Brackett said nothing, "Well, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid not," said the Major sadly. "Once this jigger's set and on beam, if you turn it off, or interfere with it in any way, you activate the switch at the other end, and your barge load goes up."

"I think, Major," said the Home Secretary, "that if you could explain, in terms simple enough to be understood by someone like myself who knows nothing about electronics, then we might be able to see our way more clearly."

Apart from Major Brackett, his audience consisted of the Police Commissioner, the head of the Special Branch, Commander Elfe, Chief Superintendent Baker in charge of River Division, and Mr.

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Fortescue. Mr. Behrens was sitting unobtrusively in the background.

"Well," said the Major, "there are a number of different ways of detonating explosives at a distance."

"As we know," said Elfe grimly.

"The simplest is a pair of linked sets. Master and slave, we call them. The master emits an impulse which increases in strength as the two sets come together. When they are a predetermined distance apart the stronger 'kills' the weaker one. This throws a switch, and the explosive goes up."

"I'm with you so far," said the Home Secretary.

"It can be linked to an automatic steering device. We've developed one recently, on the ranges at Bovington. It steers an old tank filled with explosive into an enemy strong point and detonates it when it gets there. In fact, if Mounteagle has managed to get hold of the latest box of tricks, there's an additional jigger which not only keeps the tank on a predetermined course but allows it to side-step obstacles. It's done with an 'eye'—a photocell connected with a microprocessor that registers changes of light striking the cell and takes the appropriate action."

"Does that mean that Mounteagle need never go on board at all? Suppose he's fixed the slave set to go off at—what? Fifty yards? That would be about the distance from the edge of the embankment to the car park under the House. Then he could leave it to steer itself downstream."

"I doubt he'd do that," said Baker. "The barge would call too much attention to itself, zigzagging down the river like a pinball. He'll surely take it down as far as he can by manual steering—at least until it's dark. Any time after that, I agree, he could leave it to its own devices."

For a moment the men in the room were silent. They were watching a steel craft, packed with enough explosive to tear the top off a mountain, sliding downstream in the darkness, steering under bridges, avoiding other boats, obedient only to the beckoning of its master in Parliament.

The Home Secretary said, "Where is it now?"

The Commissioner said, "Our last report was Bell View Lock, below Runnymede. The Colonel was certainly on board then. He was making about four miles an hour." He was studying a map that Baker had produced. "Say it's dark by seven. If he keeps up that speed he'd be ten miles above Westminster by then."

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"The tide'll be against him when he gets below Teddington," said Baker. "He won't make more than three miles an hour after that."

Everyone did some mental arithmetic.

Elfe said, "Then H-hour could be either side of ten o'clock."

"Is there any chance," said the Home Secretary, "of getting someone aboard *after* the Colonel's left and reverting to—what did you call it?—manual steering."

"If you tried that," said Brackett, "you'd almost certainly send the whole lot up. No. I'm afraid there's only one answer. Put the master set from Pocock's car into a police launch and lead the barge out to sea. Safe enough if the launch keeps two hundred yards ahead. Have an experienced man in charge."

"I'll take it myself," said Baker. "That is," he added with a grin, "if the Major will come with me in case of any—er—technical hitches."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," said Brackett, looking sadder than ever.

"Very well, gentlemen," said the Home Secretary briskly. "That seems to be the best plan. You have total authority to clear the river of craft, and take any other precautionary measures you think necessary. I assume that Mounteagle plans to bolt abroad. You'll take the usual steps to block the exits."

The Commissioner said, "It occurs to me, Home Secretary, that if we succeed in taking the barge out to sea and destroying it, we shall have very little real evidence left. Suppose he decides to brazen it out."

"He'll have to brazen out one murder and one attempted murder," said Mr. Fortescue coldly. "Calder recovered sufficiently an hour ago to tell us what happened at Petheridge."

"When you're dealing with a madman," said the Home Secretary, "it's impossible to predict what he'll do."

Mr. Behrens disagreed, though he felt it was hardly his place to say so. He thought he knew exactly what the Colonel was planning to do.

At ten o'clock that night Mr. Behrens was sitting, alone, on a bench on a hilltop on the northern fringe of London. In front of him, and below him, a million lights twinkled through the misty darkness. There were smaller lights, which were windows and lamp standards and motorcars, and larger lights which were bonfires. The nearest was a quarter of a mile below the point where he was sitting.

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He could see the dark figures congregated round it like priests at a ritual burning, and he could just see, lashed to a stake on top, the grotesque parody of Guy Fawkes, the first great pyrotechnic.

A rocket sailed up into the sky and burst in clusters of red and yellow lights.

Mr. Behrens had chosen this particular place because he was convinced that Colonel Mounteagle, if he avoided immediate capture, would come there too.

A bronze plaque, set in a stone pillar beside the bench, was the reason for his certainty.

"Parliament Hill Fields," it said, "so named because the conspirators who, in the year 1605, planned to blow up the Houses of Parliament, escaping to the North, halted their horses at this spot to observe the outcome of their device."

With his strong sense of history, the Colonel must surely come to that spot to observe the outcome of his own more powerful and sophisticated device.

Mr. Behrens was wondering exactly what the Colonel had planned to do, and what he would have done but for the unfortunate contretemps at Petheridge. There were several ways in which he might have escaped detection. On the supposition that the original barge would be destroyed beyond any possibility of identification, he needed only to have a duplicate ready filled with explosive, of which he had no doubt already accumulated a stock at his works, waiting for him below Tower Bridge. He could then proceed quietly on his way with this and turn a bland face of innocence to the world. Suspicion, yes. But proof would turn on a number of imponderables, such as whether they could prove the acquisition by the Colonel of the self-steering device.

It was at this moment that Mr. Behrens heard a car draw up and stop on the road above him. A door slammed. Footsteps came crunching down the cinder track toward the seat. Mr. Behrens had never met the Colonel, but he had been shown photographs of him, and in the dying light of the rocket he had no difficulty in recognizing him.

The Colonel stood for a long minute, in silence, staring down at the scene below. Mr. Behrens stood up, and the movement caught the Colonel's eye. He turned his head.

"A magnificent spectacle, is it not?" said Mr. Behrens.

The Colonel grunted.

"But I fear that the main attraction has been canceled. Owing,

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you might say, to a technical hitch. When it does take place, it will be some miles offshore, and with a very limited audience."

The Colonel was motionless, a black figure outlined against the night sky. When he spoke his voice sounded quite easy. He said, "Who are you, little man?"

"I doubt if this is really a moment for introductions," said Mr. Behrens. "I am a very old friend of one of the men you shot last night. Not Cairns, the other one."

"The Government spy."

"I suppose that's as good a description as any."

"And what do you propose to do about it?"

The Colonel had swung round now, but both his hands were visible, hanging idle by his side. Mr. Behrens moved toward him until he was quite close, watching the Colonel's hands all the time.

He said, "It seemed to me that there was only one logical end to this matter, Colonel. You come up here to witness the success of your plan. Being disappointed in its failure—we may assume by now, I think, that it has failed—you decide to take your own life."

So saying, Mr. Behrens shot Colonel Mounteagle neatly through the heart. He had removed the silencer from his gun, being confident that the noise of the shot would arouse no interest on this particular night. He stooped over the crumpled body, pressed the muzzle against the entry point of the bullet, and fired again. Then he wiped the gun carefully and pressed it into the Colonel's right hand.

A salvo of rockets soared up into the sky, and burst almost overhead with a loud crack and a shower of silver rain.

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*"Isn't it time we did?" Mrs. Beresford asked . . .*

# THE DISPATCHING OF GEORGE FERRIS

**by BILL PRONZINI**

Mrs. Beresford and Mrs. Lenhart were sitting together in the parlor, knitting and discussing recipes for fruit cobbler, when Mr. Pascotti came hurrying in. "There's big news," he said. "Mr. Ferris is dead."

A gleam came into Mrs. Beresford's eyes. She looked at Mrs. Lenhart, noted a similar gleam, and said to Mr. Pascotti, "You did say dead, didn't you?"

"Dead. Murdered."

"Murdered? Are you sure?"

"Well," Mr. Pascotti said, "he's lying on the floor of his room all over blood, with a big knife sticking in his chest. What else would you call it?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Lenhart agreed. "Definitely murder."

Mrs. Beresford laid down her knitting and folded her hands across her shelflike bosom. "How did you happen to find him, Mr. Pascotti?"

"By accident. I was on my way down to the john—"

"Lavatory," Mrs. Lenhart said.

"—and I noticed his door was open. He never leaves his door open, not when he's here and not when he's not here. So I'm a good neighbor. I peeked inside to see if something was wrong, and there he was, all over blood."

Mrs. Beresford did some reflecting. George Ferris had been a resident of their roominghouse for six months, during which time he had managed to create havoc in what had formerly been a peaceful and pleasant environment. She and the other residents had complained to the landlord, but the landlord lived elsewhere and chose not to give credence to what he termed "petty differences among neighbors." He also seemed to like Mr. Ferris, with whom he had

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had minor business dealings before Ferris' retirement and who he considered to possess a sparkling sense of humor. This flaw in his judgment of human nature made him a minority of one, but in this case the minority's opinion was law.

The problem with Mr. Ferris was that he had been a practical joker. Not just an occasional practical joker; oh, no. A constant, unending, remorseless practical joker. A *Practical Joker* with capitals and in italics. Sugar in the salt shaker; ground black pepper in the tea. Softboiled eggs substituted for hardboiled eggs. Kitchen cleanser substituted for denture powder. Four white rats let loose in the dining room during supper. Photographs of naked ladies pasted inside old Mr. Tipton's *Natural History* magazine. Whoopee cushions, water glasses that dribbled, fuzzy spiders and rubber-legged centipedes all over the walls and furniture. These and a hundred other indignities—a deluge, an avalanche of witless and childish pranks.

Was it any wonder, Mrs. Beresford thought, that somebody had finally done him in? No, it was not. The dispatching of George Ferris, the joker, was in fact an act of great mercy.

"Who could have done it?" Mrs. Lenhart asked after a time.

"Anybody who lives here," Mr. Pascotti said. "Anybody who ever spent ten minutes with that lunatic."

"You don't suppose it was possibly an intruder?"

"Who would want to intrude in this place? No, my guess is it was one of us."

"You don't mean one of *us*?"

"What, you or Mrs. Beresford? Nice widow ladies like you? The thought never crossed my mind, believe me."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Pascotti."

"For what?"

"The compliment. You said we were nice widow ladies."

Mr. Pascotti, who had been a bachelor for nearly seven decades, looked somewhat uncomfortable. "You don't have to worry—the police won't suspect you, either. They'd have to be crazy. Policemen today are funny, but they're not crazy."

"They might suspect you, though," Mrs. Beresford said.

"Me? That's ridiculous. All I did was find him on my way to the john—"

"Lavatory," Mrs. Lenhart said.

"All I did was find him. I didn't make him all over blood."

"But they might think you did," Mrs. Beresford said.

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"Not a chance. Ferris was ten years younger than me and I've got arthritis so bad I can't even knock loud on a door. So how could I stick a big knife in his chest?"

Mrs. Lenhart adjusted the drape of her shawl. "You know, I really can't imagine anybody here doing such a thing. Can you, Irma?"

"As a matter of fact," Mrs. Beresford said, "I can. We all have hidden strengths and capacities, but we don't realize it until we're driven to the point of having or needing to use them."

"That's very profound."

"Sure it is," Mr. Pascotti said. "It's also true."

"Oh, I'm sure it is. But I still prefer to think it was an intruder who sent Mr. Ferris on to his reward, whatever that may be."

Mr. Pascotti gestured toward the parlor windows and the sunshine streaming in through them. "It's broad daylight," he said. "Do intruders intrude in broad daylight?"

"Sometimes they do," Mrs. Lenhart said. "Remember last year, when the police questioned everybody about strangers in the neighborhood? There were a series of daylight burglaries right over on Hawthorn Boulevard."

"So it could have been an intruder, I'll admit it. We'll tell the police that's what we think. Why should any of us have to suffer for making that lunatic dead?"

"Isn't it time we did?" Mrs. Beresford asked.

"Did? Did what?"

"Tell the police what we think. After we tell them Mr. Ferris is lying up in his room with a knife in his chest."

"You're right," Mr. Pascotti said, "it is time. Past time. A warm day like this, things happen to dead bodies after a while."

He turned and started over to the telephone. But before he got to it there was a sudden eruption of noise from out in the front hallway. At first it sounded to Mrs. Beresford like a series of odd snorts, wheezes, coughs, and gasps. When all these sounds coalesced into a recognizable bellow, however, she realized that what she was hearing was wild laughter.

Then George Ferris walked into the room.

He was wearing an old sweatshirt and a pair of old dungarees, both of which were, as Mr. Pascotti had said, all over blood. In his left hand he carried a wicked-looking and also very bloody knife. His chubby face was contorted into an expression of mirth bordering on ecstasy and he was laughing so hard that tears flowed down both cheeks.

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Mrs. Beresford stared at him with her mouth open. So did Mrs. Lenhart and Mr. Pascotti. Ferris looked back at each of them and what he saw sent him into even greater convulsions.

The noise lasted for fifteen seconds or so, subsided into more snorts, wheezes, and gasps, and finally ceased altogether. Ferris wiped his damp face and got his breathing under control. Then he pointed to the crimson stains on his clothing. "Chicken blood," he said. He pointed to the weapon clutched in his left hand. "Trick knife," he said.

"A joke," Mr. Pascotti said. "It was all a joke."

"Another joke," Mrs. Lenhart said.

"Another indignity," Mrs. Beresford said.

"And you fell for it," Ferris reminded them. "Oh, boy, did you fall for it! You should have seen your faces when I walked in." He began to cackle again. "My best one yet," he said, "no question about it. My best one *ever*. Why, by golly I don't think I'll live to pull off a better one."

Mrs. Beresford looked at Mrs. Lenhart. Then she looked at Mr. Pascotti. Then she picked up one of her knitting needles and looked at the pudgy joker across its sharp glittering point.

"Neither do we, Mr. Ferris," she said. "Neither do we."

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a *NEW* Sam Train story by

**ERNEST SAVAGE**

*Sam Train plays it either way—brains or brawn. Sam is a private eye who has been around and knows the score—a former cop who could be called an idealistic realist (or, perhaps more accurately, a realistic idealist). When Sam meets his dream girl, with her "precise and elegant profile" and cameo face, he is drawn into the mysterious prologue to one of his toughest investigations . . .*

# THERE IS NO TOMORROW

***by ERNEST SAVAGE***

She had sounded about 13 on the phone and didn't look much older as she approached my car across the empty drive-in parking lot. She'd said that at 2:30 in the afternoon there wouldn't be anybody there and she was right. Not even a car-hop in sight. Just a guy in the kitchen staring gloomily through a grease-stained service window.

She stopped ten feet from the passenger door of the car and squinted at it. I'd told her it was a blue '72 Dart with a dent in the right front fender she couldn't miss, but she was making sure; and in this town and these times I didn't blame her. I reached over, opened the door, shoved it wide, and she came on quickly, got in, and slammed the door fast. She took a deep breath, which raised her scant bosom a bare quarter-inch, and stared straight ahead through the windshield. She had one of the most precise and elegant profiles I've ever seen and I enjoyed for that brief moment just looking at it.

"What're you scared of?" I said gently, and the cameo turned and became full face for an instant and I thought, Raphael; no, Botticelli; no, Blake, and then it turned away again and I wasn't sure.

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"I'm not scared," she said to the windshield. "I just didn't bring my glasses."

"I'm over here," I said.

"Yes, I know. I can hear you."

I grinned and settled back and studied her. She had long dark ironed-out hair parted in the middle and draped over the shoulders, fore and aft, a red dress, a lot of beads around her slender neck, sandals on her feet, and a big white plastic purse clutched in her lap. Clean ankles and no smell, not even the patchouli that seems to be in vogue these days among the unwashed young. I like no smell; I trust it.

"What's your name?" I said. She hadn't told me over the phone; she hadn't told me anything over the phone. She said she'd tell me here.

"Susan W—Winston." A slight hesitation, as though she were not quite sure.

"How old, Susan?"

"Nineteen." A swift glance from the big dark eyes and I thought, yeah, maybe.

"And what can I do for you?"

"You can help me collect a reward. I know this thing that's going to happen and you can help me keep it from happening and we can collect a reward."

"What thing?"

"I can't tell you now. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Where's it going to happen?"

"In El Martino."

"Across the Bay?"

"Yes."

"You live there?"

"Yes, er—yes."

"When's it going to happen?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Susan, look at me."

Her chin dropped an inch, as though digging in. She was silent, rigid.

"Why won't you look at me?"

"There's no need to."

"All right." I sighed. "Did you bring the money?" I'd told her my fee was $200 a day and to bring it along.

"Yes," she said, and dug through the skein of beads around her

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neck to a place between her breasts and brought forth a wad of well-traveled bills. I took it from her. "That's only a hundred sixty-seven," she said. "It's all I could get together. I'll give you the rest tomorrow."

"Susan, tomorrow's another day and another $200."

That brought her face around. "You mean it's $200 *every* day?"

I thought: she doesn't like to be stared at, that's why she won't look at people. She's shy of her beauty, she's been hurt by it. Blake, I decided, the ethereal quality of Blake. "Never on Sunday," I said. "And sometimes not on Tuesday, either." Tomorrow was Tuesday.

"Thank you," she said gravely. "But I'll pay you from the reward money when I get it." Her head began to turn away, but I caught her chin in my hand and held it. Her eyes immediately closed and I gazed at her with a mixture of reverence and desire—a desire to protect, almost a passion to protect. I could feel fear in the bones of her chin.

"Two things," I said. "First, you can't collect a reward for something that *might* happen—not usually; and second, I want to know what you're scared of. Tell me!" I let her chin go and it snapped back to eyes front. But she remained silent.

"All right, Susie. Your boy friend is going to knock over a bank, or something, and you want me to prevent it."

"I have no boy friend."

"They're all eunuchs in El Martino?"

Her shoulders hunched. "Don't be vulgar."

"Then a brother, a relative, a friend."

"No."

"Then what?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"There is no tomorrow," I said, and handed the money back.

She recoiled from it. "Please, Mr. Train, you *must* keep it! Please, Mr. Train!"

Why must I keep it? I thought. I looked at it in my extended hand and wondered why she'd withdrawn it from her bosom. Why not from that large purse in her lap? What was in there she didn't want me to see? With my free hand I snatched it from her lap and heard the sharp, shocked intake of her breath.

"No!" she said, but was undisposed to fight. Angels don't; angels play harps and drift through the air.

There was a gun in the purse. It was wrapped in an oily cloth, which in turn was wrapped in a heavy plastic bag, which had been buried in the earth. Little strings of soil were still embedded within

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the folds of the bag. I removed the wrappings carefully and dropped them on the floor. It was a Smith & Wesson .38 automatic, clean under its shrouds. The smell of gun oil filled the front of the car. I looked at Susan who was looking at me, but her stricken eyes fell.

"I found it," she said softly.

"With a shovel, Susie? Huh? Where?"

She didn't answer.

I checked the clip and the action. It was loaded and ready for work. The serial numbers had been filed off crudely. I put it in my jacket pocket and she said, "No," again, but I paid no attention. I took a wallet from the purse. It had one dollar in it, which confirmed my reverence for her, but her ID card didn't. It confirmed only her age and her first name. Her last name, as locked in the plastic of the card, was Weston, not Winston; and a bell rang in the wings of my mind. She was watching me obliquely.

"Why, Susie?"

"What's in a name?" She tried a shrug.

"A life. A lie."

"It doesn't matter. You can keep the gun if you want."

"You've got another, huh? Or *he* has."

"It doesn't matter."

The bell rang again in the wings of my mind and a curtain opened. I was standing in the hallway outside a courtroom in Oakland nine years ago. Mark Weston had just been found guilty of murder in the first degree and he came out of a side door, cuffed to a jailer. He saw me and angled over to where I was and stopped. He had a smile on his handsome face. He wanted to tell me something and I bent him my ear.

"I'm gonna kill you, Train," he whispered.

It didn't surprise me; a lot of them tell you that. "You're gonna be on the shelf a long time, Mark," I said. "Maybe some street punk'll beat you to it."

"I hope not, oh, I hope not. Stay alive for me, Sam."

Then he was pulled away.

Nine weeks before that, at eight o'clock on a Friday night, I and several other cops had caught him in the back yard of the house he was renting in Oakland. He was trying to go over the rear fence, but a black-and-white was in the alley waiting for him and he fell back in the yard where for about two minutes he and I had a classic fist fight before help came out from the house and we subdued him.

Back in the house—a little later—his son and daughter were

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sitting white-faced and scared on a couch under the protective arms of a neighbor lady. I didn't get a good look at them because one of my eyes was nearly closed and the other full of anger; but they got a good look at me. They were just kids.

Weston had killed a liquor-store owner in San Francisco in the course of a holdup. He pleaded innocent, and his main line of defense was that the murder weapon had never been found. But it wasn't enough. Everything else said it was Weston, and he'd been sent up for the mandatory life sentence. His psychiatric report had called him a "psychopath," which can be another word for "animal." I endorse it. His wife had committed suicide a couple years before, for her own good reasons. The curtain in my mind closed.

What are the odds, I thought, that this girl sitting here now was that girl sitting there then in that house in Oakland? Maybe that's why she has showed me so little of her face, fearing I might recognize it, not knowing I was three-quarters blind at the time. There was more here than just an eyeful of female beauty. Reverence waned. "Susie," I said, "how come you chose me out of all the private investigators there are around the Bay?"

"Somebody told me about you. This man—"

"In church yesterday, huh?"

"Don't blaspheme!" she said sharply, her chin jutting up. "Just this man, that's all. Please, Mr. Train."

Was that blasphemy? A raw nerve there. "Okay," I said, "forgive me. Now about tomorrow. Where and when are you going to tell me all these things you won't tell me today?"

"In El Martino. Tomorrow morning at ten. At the corner of Olive and Fourth." The face had come around again and stayed, the dark luminous eyes full of plea. "You *will* come, won't you, Mr. Train?"

"Describe it to me."

"It's just a corner—in a neighborhood. Houses all around, old, kind of—"

"No empty warehouses?"

"What? No. Just houses, those old bungalow kind. You'll come, won't you, please?"

"Where'd you find this gun, Susie?"

Eyes front again. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Something like a smile touched her lips for the first time, and there was a trace of the Mark Weston charm in it.

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"Okay," I said. "I'll be there. Come alone, Susie."

Was she Lorelei?

Back in my apartment I called my friend, Sergeant Bill Brady at the Folsom Street Station, and asked him to find out for me—among other things—if Mark Weston was still in Soledad, and if not, why not, and where was he? Bill said he'd check it right away. We were a prowl-car team once.

Then I put in a call to Ellie Fish at the County Probation Department for a report on Susan Weston and her brother. They would have been wards of the County all those years. While waiting for Ellie to come on the line, I considered the situation. If Mark was out of jail, was he using his daughter as bait to lure me into a trap? And if not, then what? All I knew about Susie was that if I had been ordered to make a nineteen-year-old girl out of the stuff of my dreams, I would have made her. But Mark couldn't have known that, nor could Susie herself. Another man would have made another girl, with more heft up front, probably, and 20/20 vision. We don't all reverence the same dream.

And what about the gun? I was betting myself it was the .38 we couldn't find nine years ago, that Mark had buried it somewhere and dug it up, maybe yesterday. Or somebody had. But if Mark was behind the scheme, would he have let her take the gun to a meeting with me?

Or was she supposed to have made the hit herself, but had chickened out? No! Not *my* dream girl. But still, the word "ambush" sounded in my mind like a foghorn out past the Golden Gate, graveyard of careless ships.

"Hello dreamboat," I heard Ellie say in my ear. "You wanna marry me, that's why you called—right?"

"Still leading with your chin, huh, kid?" I hadn't talked to Ellie since I'd quit the Force and had forgotten how strong she came on. But she was good at her work and when I told her I wanted a full rundown on Susie and her brother, she said she'd have it for me in an hour.

Well, it was two hours later when she called back, but by then it didn't matter so much because Bill Brady had called earlier with a surprise. I had my shoes off and was into my second Scotch when his call came.

"Mark Weston is dead," he said. "He died last month. Inoperable tumor."

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"In or out, Bill?"

"In. He was up for parole in six months, but that's academic now. Seems he was a model prisoner."

"I'll bet," I said, digesting the news.

"Does that help, Sam?"

"Damned if I know. It would have been clearer if he was out of jail and alive. But this way—I don't know."

"That other thing you asked about might be a jewelers' convention at the El Martino Beach Hotel. It's set to open tomorrow night for two days. About a million bucks worth of ice on display."

"That would attract attention, wouldn't it? Who's doing the security?"

"A private outfit—retired MPs. You know the type."

"Yeah, triple-threat men, heavy of gut, slow of foot, blind of eye."

"What's going down, Sam? Somebody going to hit that show?"

"It could be, but I've got no real idea."

"Listen, can I help?"

"Hell, man, you already have."

"You know what I mean, like after hours."

Bill and I had talked about his joining me in a partnership of P.I.s after his retirement in a few years. And maybe it'll happen; but I kind of like it the way it is now, with my office in the kitchen.

"There's not that much to do on this job," I said. "At least not yet. Oh, one thing, Bill, let me trade cars with you in the morning. Leave the keys under the mat and I'll pick it up at the station. Okay? I'll be wearing my tramp outfit, so don't be alarmed if you see me."

"Okay, pard," he said; and I thought, yeah, maybe.

I parked Bill's red-and-white Fury on Olive Street in El Martino the next morning at 9:45, a half block from the intersection of 4th. I was deliberately early because I wanted to see Susie arrive and not vice versa. I was still thinking in terms of ambush, even though I'd learned a lot about Susie and her brother from Ellie Fish last night. But nothing to give me a solid lead.

Her brother was 20, a little more than a year older than Susie and out of a different mold entirely. His name was Bob. He'd done poorly in school, where she'd done well. He'd been bounced through a succession of four foster homes, where she'd lived in one. He'd had trouble with both school and civil authorities, where she'd had none. And so forth, all down the line; he was bad and she was good.

"In fact," Ellie had said, "she's damn near too perfect, too disci-

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plined, too strict with herself. It's a pattern I've seen before, Sam. My guess is, if you want it, that her old man made a pass at her when she was a kid and froze her stiff. Her case worker thought so too, and what might be a confirming piece of evidence is that she never once wrote her father, whereas Bob did every week."

"Ugly thought," I muttered.

"Sensitive boy! It happens in the best of families."

"And the worst too, apparently. Ellie, what kind of trouble has Bob been in?"

"Youth-gang things, mostly. Ripping off lunch money from his juniors, swiping stuff from stores, and one charge of possession—pot. Almost average for a kid whose father's in the slammer. It's worse by far than being an out-and-out orphan."

"Yeah, they've always got that day hanging over their heads when the old man gets out. But Bob worshipped his father, evidently, or why all those letters?"

"Happens that way. Sometimes they're heroes to their sons. Don't ask me why. What's with this kid, Sam?"

"I don't know yet, maybe nothing. Ellie, were Susie and Bob close? Were they friends?"

I heard her shuffle papers. "From the record, I'd think not," she said. "But they went to the same schools and lived in the same neighborhood, so they saw each other at least."

"Would she be protective of him? I mean, given her personality."

"Very likely. She probably nagged hell out of him every time he got in a jam. Little mother type."

"He probably needed it."

"All men do, you ape."

"Yeah, sure. Ellie, listen, out of all the private cops around the Bay, she called me yesterday, and I'm not even listed in the book. So she must have remembered me from the time when I arrested her father. Now, if she was frightened of him then and is frightened of something now, maybe she has *me* cast in a protector's role. You think that follows?"

"Absolutely. So watch yourself, lover."

"That I will. Thanks, Ellie."

Well, maybe that was a lead, I thought, sitting there waiting for Susie. But in which direction? I wriggled in the unfamiliar seat of Bill's car, missing the tailored configurations of mine, pounded out over long hard years on the road; but at least, if somebody was on

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the lookout for a blue Dart with a dented fender, being in something else would give me a little edge. Similarly idle thoughts occupied my mind until at ten o'clock exactly she arrived and my heart lifted in joy.

She was on 4th approaching from the Bay and walking fast, dressed as she had been yesterday, and alone.

She stopped at the corner and looked carefully along all four radial streets, her eyes lingering a moment on Bill's Fury before passing on. She looked furtive. I let five full minutes go by before I got slowly out of the car in the manner of a tired old man, cane in hand.

I hobbled over to the sidwalk. I was wearing frayed tennis shoes, a patched old pair of pants, a sweat shirt, and an ancient tweed jacket sagging at the pockets like saddlebags. A broad-brimmed straw hat, torn and stained, covered my head like an umbrella, and dark glasses my eyes. It was an outfit I'd used as a cop—in fact, the only disguise I'd ever used, because I'd discovered long ago that if you look old and poor and ill, you're as close to invisible as you can get in this world. The Smith & Wesson .38 was like a heavy stone in the right-hand jacket pocket.

Susie looked at me briefly without interest, getting impatient now. I wasn't her man. I'd gone about 50 of the 300 or so feet between us when a Dodge van came rattling past me on Olive and squealed to a halt where Susie stood. Two men jumped out, grabbed her, had her back in the van and were underway again before I could close, at a dead run, more than half of the distance between us. Much too far away to do any good, but close enough to read the license number on the van, and I stood there long enough to drill it in my head before I turned and ran back to the Fury.

An old guy in a robe standing on his front porch hollered at me, "Hey, what was that all about?" and I veered sharply left and ran up his short front walk.

"You got a phone?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Let me use it, I'm a cop." I was up the steps and through his open door before he could move. The phone was on a table in the front room and I went to it, picked it up, and dialed the Folsom Street Station.

"You don't look like no cop," the man said, standing warily just inside the room. Striped pajama pants and slippers showed beneath his robe.

"Special assignment," I said, and then Bill was on the line. I told

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him my girl had been snatched and I needed to know who owned the license number I gave him and where he lived. I told him I'd wait for his answer on an open line.

"How come," the man said, "you ain't got no radio equipment in that car of yours out there, like Starsky and Hutch? I seen you sittin' there for twenty minutes."

He looked ready to leap back out his own front door and holler for help if I gave him a wrong answer. A 25-inch console TV stood grandly in the corner of the room facing the couch. Everything else in sight was early Social Security. He probably knew more about police procedure than I did.

I countered with a question: "Did you see that Dodge van come past your house?"

"Yeah."

"What year would you say it was?"

"Sixty-eight, sixty-nine, I don't know. Why?"

"How many men were in it?"

"Two was all."

"You sure?"

"Two was all I seen."

"Thanks, that'll help. The report I had said there might be three. This thing is breaking fast now—"

He moved a step closer. "Hey, what's goin' down?" He knew the lingo too.

"It's bigger than we thought," I said. "That girl was CIA, and now Washington will—" I held up my hand; Bill was on and I let the name and address he gave me burn into my mind before I hung up.

"Where's Rosewood Avenue?" I said.

"About six-seven blocks inland." He pointed.

"Thanks a lot, mister. You're a good citizen, I'll mention you in the report."

It had taken about ten minutes, and the address Bill had given me was only one of a dozen possibilities, but it was the only one I had. I should have made Susie tell me more yesterday, but she'd been too damn lovely to push around.

I turned right on 4th and drove fast to the intersection of Rosewood where I turned left Starsky-and-Hutch style and slowed only long enough to check the progression of house numbers before speeding on. The van owner's name was Anthony Pirelli and his address 7250 Rosewood. It was an old neighborhood of patched streets and aging frame bungalows, about one in ten cared for and the others rapidly

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going to seed—that special kind of seed from which ugly apartments grow.

Seven blocks later, Rosewood ceased and became a walnut grove and I lost another five minutes wandering around before picking it up on the other side; 7250 was in the third block down. It was one of the cared-for ones, and next to it was another, and in the driveway between them a fat old woman in a floral-print housecoat was standing spread-legged, a roadblock of living, furious flesh. I stopped Bill's car an inch from her kneecaps and jumped out. She spoke first, snarling.

"And who in hell might you be, mister?" She hadn't budged.

"I'm looking for a Dodge van with two men and a girl in it, lady. You seen it?"

"Seen it, hell! A minute ago it damn near blew my wig off! Came out of the drive like a cannonball. Came in about ten minutes ago the same way and if you're a friend of theirs, buster, you can tell 'em they got notice as of right now! Up all hours of the night with that gut-bustin' music of theirs and God knows what all, never tend the lawn, which I got to do, never water nothin'—"

"Was the girl with them when they left?"

"Not that I seen—hey, where you think you're goin'?"

I cut around her and ran across the trim green lawn and up the steps to the front door. It was locked. It had three narrow panes of beveled plate glass running nearly its full height. I stepped back, aimed, and smashed my foot through the one nearest the lock. I saw the old lady run for what was probably her house next door as I reached through the jagged hole and slid back the bolt.

Susie was on the floor in the kitchen. Her head was rolling slowly from side to side. Her eyes were open, but unfocused, the pupils small as beebees. There was a bruise on the left side of her jaw. A hypodermic syringe was on the floor not far from her right hand. A soft singing sound issued from her mouth and for half a beat before I picked her up I stood there and cursed myself. I'd done her about as much good so far as her father had.

She was as loose and light as a flannel doll in my arms. I stooped and picked up the syringe between two fingers and headed for the front door and the car outside. The landlady was back in the driveway, a notepad in her hand, writing down Bill's license number. I asked her if she'd called the cops and she said, "You're damn right I called 'em! That glass'll cost you thirty bucks if it costs a nickel. What's the matter with the girl? OD'd, huh? Wish they all would.

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Forty bucks, maybe. What kind of people are you, anyway?"

I strapped Susie into the shoulder harness on the passenger side of the Fury and ran around the angry old woman to the driver's side and got in. Susie was muttering something about "Bobby" when I backed out of the drive and headed fast for Bay Shore Boulevard. One of the few things I knew about El Martino was the location of the hospital, facing the Bay.

"What about Bobby?" I said. "Did Bobby pop you?"

"Feel good," she murmured, "feel *oh* so good."

"Susie, where'd they go? Is it the jewel show?"

"Pretty jewels—Bobby mustn't. Bobby must be good."

"Susie, what was it? Heroin, smack? What?"

"Bobby must be good—feel good."

She was nodding, her neck limp. With my right hand I steadied her head and I drove Bill's Fury fast. At Bay Shore Boulevard I made a hard left against the light through scattered traffic, tires squealing. Memorial Hospital was about nine blocks farther down the Bay.

Susie was out now, but still alive, the pulse in her left wrist weak but readable, her breathing slow. She was lucky—maybe. A true overdose can kill you in minutes; but sometimes—frequently, even—a pusher will powder down a fix to increase his profit, and maybe that's what had happened. Some swine somewhere, with a few extra bucks in his pocket, had maybe saved the life of this strange, lovely girl. I was praying so.

At the hospital I turned hard right and went around to the emergency entrance at the rear.

A burly aide in white had Susie's door open the moment the car stopped, and her limp form up in his arms a moment later. To the question in his eyes, I said, "OD."

I took the syringe and followed him up the ramp at a run, but inside I was stopped by a man at a counter. "Hold it!" he said. "What's her name and what happened?"

I told him and showed him the syringe. He ignored it. "And what's your name?" he said, eyeing me with distaste.

"You don't need my name. Take the syringe in there in case they want to test it." The aide had carried Susie into a receiving room. I could see her sandaled feet on the end of a table.

"I've got to make a police report on all ODs."

"Well, make it!" I snarled and walked around the counter into the receiving room. An intern was looking into Susie's vacant eyes.

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"This is the syringe," I said, and handed it to him. "Probably heroin, but I'm not sure."

"Who're you?"

"That makes no damn difference," I said and walked out.

The counterman was outside now, noting down the Fury's license number and I thought, my God, Bill's going to be on the wanted list before lunch. I got in the car and curled back to Bay Shore Boulevard and turned right. The El Martino Beach Hotel was about a quarter mile farther south between the Boulevard and the Bay, tall and clear in the bright morning sun even at that distance.

At the entrance I noted the announcement of the jewelers' show starting tonight, and I thought if I were going to knock the place over I'd do it now when they're bringing the stuff in. But there was no sign of the Dodge van in the big parking lot out back. I circled the place twice, making sure, and then parked against the brick wall overlooking the hotel's marina and the Bay. Nearby was a phone booth and I thought I'd better call Bill. It was 11:15.

"If I was you," I said, when he finally came on, "I'd give up without a fight. Why didn't you tell me your car was hot?"

"It wasn't."

"It is now."

"Who'd you kill?"

"Nobody yet. But I'm eager to try."

From the booth I could survey the parking complex of the hotel, the Bay, and the marina strung just below the wall. But the only thing I knew to look for was the Dodge van. And two men. But what two men? I'd seen just enough of them at the corner of 4th and Olive to testify (if asked) that they both wore light-colored clothes (I think) and had dark hair (I think) and weren't fat (I'm sure).

As I was recounting the events of the morning to Bill my eye steadily scanned the scene looking for something of interest. There was a lot of action all over, but none that fit my scanty bill of particulars. The Bay was busy with yachts of various kinds, merchantmen were plying the coast, and fishermen in rowboats were scattered in singles and clusters. A lot of traffic out there.

The marina below me was quiet—only one guy visibly working on his craft; the hotel landing wharf a little to my left was vacant, but a small outboard was approaching now, one man at the helm, the other up front holding a shore line. The captains' hats they wore seemed a little pretentious. A fairly stiff onshore breeze flapped the hotel pennants on poles along the wall.

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"Well, I've got some news for you too," Bill said when I'd finished. "That Dodge van of yours was reported stolen."

"Oh? When?"

"It came through about ten minutes ago. And what do you suppose that means, maestro?"

"I don't know." I thought about it: the van was barely worth owning, let alone stealing. "It could be a diversion," I said. "It's happened before—report your number one car stolen while you're using number two. Besides, Bill, they were fairly visible abducting Susie a while ago and they wouldn't want to get picked up for that before they pulled the heist. She wasn't on the schedule, they were improvising."

"How did they know where she'd be?"

"I don't know, but she's a pretty naive girl. She'd be about as easy to track as a parade."

"So then you think they're after the jewels?"

"I'm betting on it. It's the only horse in the race."

"Sam, I think I should call the El Martino cops."

"No doubt about it, but don't. Please, Bill. I'm primed for these guys and I want them badly. They may have killed my dream girl."

"You armed?"

"Yeah, I've got a .38 automatic."

"Listen, why don't I take the rest of the day off and come over there? Sam?"

The two men had moored the boat at the pier and come up the steps to the parking level and were walking purposefully toward the hotel service entrance a hundred yards away. They wore light-blue windbreakers and tan denim pants. They had dark hair under their captains' hats. They were thin and young.

"Sam?"

"Bill," I said quietly, "do nothing and keep the faith. I'll call you later."

I stayed in the booth and watched the men. I had a clear line of vision on them between two lanes of parked cars. They paused at the service entrance and looked around warily, conferred for a moment, then went in.

I stepped out of the booth and shambled, cane in hand, to the steps leading to the marina deck, went down halfway and looked back. My eyes were level with the parking lot and I could still see the service entrance clearly.

I went on down the steps and looked at their boat, a twelve-foot

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aluminum craft, like a hundred others on the Bay. The outboard motor was an Evinrude 440. It looked powerful. They'd come in slow but could go out fast—and lose themselves in all that traffic out there. Overhead the pennants snapped and crackled.

I stood there and waited. I was being a maverick cop, but an ex-cop has that option now and then—to go it alone. On the Force I'd have had the place surrounded. Bill was right, I should have let him call the El Martino cops.

A man was standing on the foredeck of a motor-sailer about 40 feet away, his stare heavy with suspicion. At a classy marina like this, a poor man suddenly becomes visible. He said something to me that was lost in the wind and then I heard a crack that was not from one of the pennants overhead and looked quickly back at the hotel.

They were coming at a dead run, a guard in a brown uniform loping after them. I hollered at the man on the boat to go hide and got out Weston's gun and took up a firing position against the high marina wall.

Bobby Weston and his friend Pirelli came down the steps neck and neck and headed for their boat. Old habit took over and I yelled, "Police!" They whirled on me and braced, guns up. Then the guard shot and Weston shot and I shot, in that order. Bang, bang, bang. Like that. Weston and Pirelli went down. For a moment the guard stood at the head of the steps, his heavy belly convulsing for breath, and then he sat down hard. The man on the launch was still there, frozen in a crouch, his back turned. Now the guard's head was down between his knees, but he hadn't been hit, he was just pooped.

Pirelli was nearest me at the edge of the wharf. The guard's shot had gone through his left eye and Pirelli was dead. My shot had hit Weston in the center of his chest and he was dead too, about 15 feet away. His shot had caromed off the brick wall a foot over my head.

I took Pirelli's gun from his hand and dropped it in the Bay and put Mark Weston's gun in its place, pressing Pirelli's fingers around the butt and trigger. It was hurried, but it would probably work. I wasn't quite sure then why I did it. A handful of diamond rings had fallen out of Pirelli's jacket pocket and were glittering in the sun on the wharf. I walked up the steps to where the guard sat. He'd thrown up all over his brightly polished shoes. I said, "Nice shooting," but he didn't hear me.

Then I walked over to Bill's car, got in, and hoped to God nobody was noting down his license number again. But there didn't seem to be anyone around. . .

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I drove all the way back to the Folsom Street Station in San Francisco without being stopped. I parked Bill's Fury where it belonged, put the keys under the mat, got in my Dart, and went home. I took a shower, changed clothes, then drove back to Memorial Hospital in El Martino, obeying the law all the way. I felt numb.

Susie was in what they called a "guarded condition." I'd gone in the front door this time and told them at the counter who I was and what I wanted, and this frosty young intern came out after a while and said it was probably the first time she'd taken a pop intravenously and had messed it up. I didn't argue. If Susie wanted to straighten it out later, she could. It was her record and her life.

So I sat there for a couple of hours chewing on it, trying to determine what she *hadn't* told me yesterday, and probably never would now. For why should she? Why should I even ask? Her whole plan had been to save her brother and he was gone now; dispatched, I thought lugubriously, by my hand. I shuddered in the warm tense waiting-room air and knew clearly now why impulse had made me put Weston's gun in Pirelli's hand. The one thing I would not have her ever know was that I had killed her brother. It could go down that Pirelli had shot him in the panic of the moment, and that she could live with. And me too.

What was I supposed to do for her at ten a.m. at the corner of 4th and Olive? Go with her to the Rosewood house like a Scoutmaster and talk the boys out of their plan? No merit badges for a stickup, lads. Her conception of good and evil was so clear that probably that was it. Bobby, it's evil to steal, so don't do it, and here's Mr. Train to tell you all the reasons why. You remember Mr. Train, Bobby, he's the man who caught Father that night and saved us—or at least saved me, and now, Bobby, he can save you. Such innocence! Ah, indeed, such innocence must be protected somehow and passed on to infect the next round of young barbarians, or where do we go from here?

In a "guarded condition," the intern had said, and I had a vision of flights of angels hovering over her bed preserving the precious soul for the work it had yet to do.

At 4:30 the cool young intern came back in the room, a jacket over his whites, through for the day. He told me I could go see her now and gave me a room number.

"She'll be okay?"

He shrugged.

"Until she does it again. They never do it just once."

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"This one's different, Doctor."

"Don't bet on it, mister." His smile was contemptuous, and we turned from each other and walked away.

She was in a room with a black woman who was sound asleep. A screen was between their beds and I adjusted it nervously before I sat down by her side and took her hand. I had decided to tell her straight out.

"Susie, your brother is dead. He was shot this morning during a holdup attempt at the hotel."

She turned her head away in that gesture I'll remember a long time, but then turned it back again quickly. She looked older. It had been a rough, revealing day for her and maybe it had aged her some. Sure as hell it had aged me.

"He had to do it," she said. "He believed Father was innocent. He said he had to do it for Father, to avenge him. He told me that this morning when he—did this to me." She touched her arm. "But Father wasn't innocent, Mr. Train."

"I know."

"Father was evil—and somehow he passed that evil on to Bobby. It's almost as though he killed Bobby himself. Somehow I knew it would happen. Evil is a very powerful force."

My hand tightened around hers. It was a moment to be especially careful.

"I should have told you yesterday, shouldn't I?" she said. "I wasn't very smart. You didn't believe that reward thing for a minute, did you?"

"No, but maybe it's better this way, Susie. At least it's over."

"Yes. It would have happened sometime, Mr. Train. I know that now. I tried—"

She closed her eyes tiredly and I wondered what would have happened to her and her brother if Mark Weston had given up his gun nine years ago, or we'd found it. But instead, he'd hidden it and his son knew where and had kept that special son-father faith that is its own law, the gun its symbol. I could see Bobby burying it in the back yard of every foster home he'd lived in, taking it out now and again for ritual care, and at some point Susie learned he had it. Then when his father died, he'd dug it up one last time and in a rite of sacrifice, almost, been killed by it.

That it had passed through Susie's hands and I'd pulled the trigger was the random selection of fate, or whatever force governed Bobby's

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brief and pointless life. Otherwise, I would have to blame Susie and she would have to blame me. And that couldn't be. My life was tangled enough as it was, as witness the events of the day; and hers—well, hers was clearer now than it ever had been, the road before her unobstructed by the past.

She opened her eyes and turned my way. "I owe you another day, don't I, Mr. Train?"

"You owe me the rest of your life, sugar plum." I released her hand and stood up. "Make it a good one, Susie. That's all I ask." I leaned down and kissed her forehead, then left the room.

## DETECTIVERSE

### *POST MORTEM*

*by WILLIAM F. SMITH*

To dispose of the body's quite easy enough.
This works time after time without fail:
Simply wrap in plain paper, then send parcel post,
And it promptly is lost in the mail.

### *ORIENTAL THUG*

*by WILLIAM F. SMITH*

"Was mistake, shooting death of Chang Wong,"
To his widow explained Sammy Fong.
"Aimed at victim who fled,
Husband hit by stray lead.
Please excuse this slight slip of the tong."

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## DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

*This is the 552nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "get in quick for the groundwork, watch the returns closely, and, above all, get out on schedule and never return" . . .*

*The author, James Boatman, was thirty-seven when he submitted his first story. He is married and has two sons. While raising a family and working full time at the Fresno post office, Mr. Boatman was able to obtain a law degree and membership in the California State Bar. He has been a postal inspector for the past eight years, and investigates mail-fraud violations. A postal inspector? Mail-fraud violations? Isn't this a fruitful background for detective stories?*

# THE SMOOTHEST CON

### by JAMES BOATMAN

At the end of his fourth week Vernon Mahaffey, also known as Vernon Mills, entered the bank for the last time. He was pleased that everything had gone according to plan and allowed a satisfied smile to settle on his face. And why not, he thought, it *had* been easy—and safe, all things considered. Behind the privacy of his smile he went over the steps he had taken in this his final venture—others might call it a fraud, but not Vernon. The steps were the same as always—get in quick for the groundwork, watch the returns closely, and, above all, get out on schedule and never return.

He chose a new teller, as he always did, lining up behind two talkative but attractive young women. The teller, a normal young male, would be preoccupied with them, making it that much harder to remember one Vernon Mahaffey, an unnoticeably common fellow. His smile widened as he saw the teller's eyes following the young ladies to the door.

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"Yes, sir?" said the young man, his sheepish look dispelled by Vernon's understanding grin.

"Can you tell me the balance on my account, please?" asked Vernon. He gave the account number and the teller left to check the balance printouts. He returned in about a minute.

—"Slightly over forty-seven thousand," said the young man, eager to assist his somewhat helpless-looking customer. "Were you going to make a withdrawal?"

"Yes," answered Vernon, who tapped his fingers on the counter while a dubious look on his face slowly changed to one of decisiveness. "I think forty-five should about do it."

"Forty-five hundred?"

"Thousand," said Vernon. "Yes, that should do it rather nicely." He wrote a check for the amount and slid it across to the teller's side of the counter. "Traveler's checks, please. Five-hundred-dollar denomination."

"Certainly, sir," said the teller, "but it will take a few minutes to get such a large amount. If you like, you can wait over there while I get the checks."

Vernon glanced at the chairs offered by the teller. The nearest one was occupied, but a comfortable-looking sofa was empty and he took it. As he reached for a magazine he heard a voice speak to him and he looked up. It was the man in the first chair. "Pardon me?" said Vernon.

"I said it's a damn shame how we have to wait for everything nowadays." The speaker was a stout man, stuffed in an inexpensive suit that would always need pressing. Vernon nodded politely, then turned away.

If it was meant to discourage the stranger, it failed. The man continued, "You know, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with that young fella over there. Traveler's checks, huh? Reminds me of a time two or three years back when I had occasion to investigate a case involving traveler's checks. I think it was thirty, thirty-five thousand dollars' worth, but that's not important. What reminded me of it was the fella back then asked the teller to check on his balance just before he cleaned out every last dollar." The man hesitated, looking off at nothing in particular, then went on, "No, that's not right, he left a couple of thousand behind, just like you did."

"Now see here!" said Vernon, who had heard just about enough. The nerve of the man, talking to him like that. Vernon tugged at

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the sleeve of his freshly laundered shirt, careful to show the required length of cuff under his tailored suit coat. "I don't know what—"

The man waved a hand at Vernon. "Don't get your dander up, mister. It's a common fault I have. The missus says I tend to butt in where I don't belong. But I tell her once a cop always a cop—a detective, made sergeant, too."

"How interesting," said Vernon, wondering where the young teller had gone. He thought it best to get away from the former police officer and started to rise, but another wave of the man's hand lowered him to the sofa.

"What's your hurry? You got plenty of time before he gets the traveler's checks from the back. Now this other fella—the one with the thirty thousand?—he had a nose for time. Knew just when to take the money out, right down to the last day. And I guarantee you one thing, once he got that money he never went back. Not once!" He shook his head in admiration.

Vernon glanced uneasily at the teller who had stopped at the far end of the lobby to talk to a young woman. A high-pitched giggle from the girl told Vernon it would be another few minutes before he could get out of the bank and away from this chattering boor. He turned his gaze back on the stout man and decided he was being too kind—the man was fat. Still, Vernon did not want to cause a scene by putting him in his place, so he merely smiled at the man. Be polite, he warned himself. Listen to the man's words. What could he really know?

". . . and I tell you another thing. It was the smoothest con I ever saw, and I've seen 'em all. Sure, he didn't get rich on that one haul, but he wasn't hurt any, I promise you that. Remember he was in and out in less than a month. Had me running my tail off." The ex-policeman laughed, then rested his ample chin on a pudgy hand, all the while waving his other arm in the air. "Hell, I musta put in two, three hundred hours just waiting for him to return to the bank. But he was too smart for that. I knew it. Knew it all the time."

The man appealed to Vernon for agreement in the matter. He must have taken Vernon's bewilderment as approval for wasting taxpayers' money in a useless stakeout, because he went on. "Smoothest con I ever saw! Hell, I worked the Fidelity Trust fraud and it was nothing, nothing I tell you. Oh, sure, it was tricky, don't get me wrong. But it had nothing on this one."

Vernon was startled by the teller's voice. "I've got the checks now, Mr. —"

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Relieved, Vernon jumped to his feet and said loudly, "Good! I'm in a hurry." He stepped on the fat man's feet in his haste to get to the counter. "Excuse me, Sergeant."

"No problem," said the man, who got to his feet and followed Vernon. He resumed his story as if there had been no interruption. "The funny thing about it was that the man was seen by all these people, yet none of them could really describe him." The ex-sergeant stood shoulder to shoulder with Vernon, and, as Vernon began signing protective signatures on the checks, he kept on with his story. Vernon, a rueful expression on his face, shrugged at the teller.

"It was slick," said the ex-sergeant. "The way he advertised in those newspapers, offering all that sewing material—fabrics, double knits and such—for next to nothing. Dirt cheap. The women jumped for it. Sent him their checks hand over fist. Like I said, he musta pulled in thirty, thirty-five thousand easy."

Vernon's hand cramped halfway through the signatures. He should have asked for a cashier's check, maybe even cash, but it was too late. He cast a furtive peek at the ex-detective. It was simply too soon for the man to know anything; nothing could have surfaced yet. If they were on to him, so be it. But if it was a coincidence—and the odds were it had to be—then he'd leave with the traveler's checks and never see that loutish ex-sergeant again.

". . . never did get him identified. I sent in what prints I could off the checks and such, but it was a waste of time. I knew it. I was just going through the motions." The ex-detective took a closer look at Vernon. "He'd be just about your age today and —"

Frantically Vernon fought down the urge to shout at the man. A drop of sweat made a small octopus-splotch on a check; nervously, with a cramped fist, Vernon wiped it away. Only ten or twelve checks remained to be signed.

The teller spoke up then, addressing the fat man, his voice softened by curiosity. "But I don't . . . why did the women send him the checks?"

The ex-sergeant tossed an annoyed glance at the teller—a look obviously reserved for the younger generation—and sighed. "Like I said, they were getting a good deal on the fabrics. Besides, they thought they were safe in making their checks payable to a company name. That's why it was such a smooth con. Smoothest one I ever saw."

The teller riffled the checks, verifying that Vernon had signed each one. He pushed them to Vernon's side of the counter, then said

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to the ex-sergeant, "I still don't get it. If it was a company name on the checks, he'd have to deposit them in a business account that required a corporate seal or a fictitious business name, something leaving a clue to his identity."

Vernon tucked the traveler's checks in a coat pocket and stepped away from the counter. The ex-sergeant stuck out a plump hand and grabbed Vernon's coat. "Hold on!" he said.

Vernon went slack in the man's grip and his legs almost buckled under. "Let me go!" he shouted, pulling feebly against the powerful grip.

Shocked, the man released Vernon. "Hey, take it easy, mister. You don't want to leave without hearing why it was such a good con, do you? I mean it was smooth!"

Vernon saw the open door only a few paces away. Once outside the bank, he would be free. But, at the same time, he knew it would not do to run. A con fronts his tricks all the way to the end; if he didn't he was a thief—and Vernon preferred to think of himself as a confidence man. There was a difference! Besides, he had bluffed too many tricks to change now.

He turned to face the ex-detective. His earlier grin returned easily. "Tell me, Sergeant, why was it so smooth?"

"That's ex-sergeant. I've been off the force over—"

"The con, Sergeant! The con!"

"Oh, that! Simple really. He took the last name of Sales. The women thought their checks were going to a company by the name of Duncan Sales, and all the time this fella was depositing them to the personal name of Duncan Sales. Smooth, huh?" The ex-sergeant laughed. "Never did get him identified."

Vernon laughed with him, clapped him on the shoulder, and walked away. The teller stared at the ex-sergeant, then at the back of Vernon as he walked out of the bank. The teller spoke, his voice questioning. "You don't think—?"

"Think what?"

"Well, his name is Vernon Mills. You don't think—"

The ex-sergeant bolted for the door, but by the time he got to the sidewalk Vernon Mahaffey, also known as Vernon Mills, was gone.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

*It takes a very special person to see a ghost, and an even more special person to talk with one, to become friends with one. But then Mr. Cunningham was a special ghost, and Alice—well, Alice lived in a different world, in a world of her own . . .*

# MY FRIEND, MR. CUNNINGHAM

*by JOYCE HARRINGTON*

Mr. Daniel Cunningham was not a famous ghost, but he had charm. He was not at all given to sepulchral wailing or the clanking of chains at midnight. Mr. Cunningham was a gentleman.

I never told my mother about Mr. Cunningham. I'm sure she would have made me stop seeing him. She liked so few of my friends. She refused to let me bring Violet Jenkins home because she was fat and poor and wore hand-me-down clothing. And when Andy Pennell called to take me to the movies, she gave him such a stern lecture on proper behavior that he was afraid to hold my hand and brought me right home again afterward without stopping for a Coca-Cola, and he never called again. I told Mr. Cunningham about it that night and he said not to worry because I'd soon be a grown woman and could do whatever I liked.

I met Mr. Cunningham when I was eleven years old and we moved into an apartment in the old Cunningham place on Juliana Street. It was a big old house with oddly shaped rooms and closets in queer places and no two windows the same size. It had been in the Cunningham family until the last one died off, and then it was sold and chopped up into apartments. I'd heard that during the War it was

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a way-station on the Underground Railway and there were secret rooms for hiding escaped slaves, but I never heard that it was haunted. I never found any secret rooms in our apartment; maybe they were in another part of the house. But Mr. Cunningham lost no time in making himself known to me.

The first night I was so tired from helping Mother unpack the family china and trying to get her to stop weeping over all the stuff that had been auctioned off that I just fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow. But the second night I lay there thinking over all the things that had happened in the past few months: Daddy lying in his coffin looking not like himself at all, but pink and smooth and shiny, like the wax fruit that Mother kept in a cut-glass bowl on the dining-room table; all the mysterious comings and goings of men with stiff collars and dark suits and their voices murmuring with Mother's behind closed doors; and then, of course, the day of the big auction when everything except what we'd need to furnish the apartment was sold out of doors with the sun shining on it and people crowding around to peer into drawers and sit on the chairs that had been in Mother's family for generations. They sold my pony, Ambrose, too, but I guess I was getting too big to ride him.

Mother watched the auction from behind the curtains at one of the upstairs windows, and she wouldn't let me go down and mingle with the crowd. When it was all over and the money had been counted, she put her hand on my shoulder so hard it hurt and stared over my head with her eyes so fierce she scared me, and said, "Your father was not a provident man, but I think we'll be all right now."

I tried to understand then, and since then, what she was so angry about. If she had been sad about losing Daddy, I could have understood that and maybe we could have cried together. But I couldn't cry over sideboards and wardrobes and tea services no matter how old and valuable they were, or even over the house and the land which was sold to a gentleman from Pittsburgh for a country place. So I kept my tears until I was alone, and that second night in the apartment in town, which I think she chose for its similarity to the house we'd left, I lay in my bed and closed my eyes and cried.

"Don't cry, little lady. It's never as bad as you think it is."

The voice was soft and echoed faintly as if it came from far away. I opened my eyes. The room was dark, but I had raised the shades so that if I woke during the night I would be able to look out and see the stars and feel closer to Daddy up in heaven. There in the

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bay window, seated on the window seat where I planned to curl up on rainy days and read, was a figure. I couldn't make it out too clearly, just head and wide shoulders outlined against the glass, but enough to determine that there was a man in my room.

I should have been alarmed, I suppose. Mother had issued plenty of warnings about strange men with evil, but unspecified, intentions. But there was something so comforting about his presence that I failed to cry out as a good girl should.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"Daniel V. Cunningham, at your service," he answered.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"I died here."

I had to think that over for a few minutes. Of course, I knew about ghosts. At school recess we often gathered in clumps under the elm tree in the schoolyard and told ghost stories with much giggling and shrieking. But this seemed to be the real thing, and not a bit frightening. He sat quite still in the window seat and seemed to be waiting for me to resume the conversation.

"Do you know my Daddy?" I asked.

"No. There are so many. And most drift right away into forgetfulness."

"If you see my Daddy, will you tell him where we are? He might not know that we had to sell the house and move here. I'm sure Mother would be glad to see him."

"I will," he said.

I hadn't seen him move, but suddenly he was standing beside my bed. Gentle hands rearranged my blankets and smoothed away the salty wetness from my cheeks. Then a kiss as light as hummingbird wings was dropped on my forehead.

"Go to sleep," he said. "I'll never be far away."

In the morning I watched Mother closely to see if she had any knowledge of my visitor. I was still young enough to believe that parents had some special means of knowing all the secrets of their children. But she cooked the oatmeal and brewed the tea with the thin-lipped disapproving expression that had settled on her face in recent weeks and was never to leave. All she said to me was, "Come straight home from school, Miss. No gallivanting."

In the years that followed, Mr. Cunningham was my friend and confidant. Mother was pleased that I spent so much time in my room and never questioned what it was that kept me there. Of course I yearned for friends my own age, living friends with whom I could

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enjoy the small pleasures of our little town. Obviously, Mr. Cunningham could not go with me to picnics or school dances or to the movies, but he agreed that it was only natural for me to go and to have other friends beside himself. He even suggested that one day I would marry and have children of my own.

I laughed at that. "Not if Mother has anything to do with it."

It was odd that Mother never met Mr. Cunningham. The apartment was large enough for the two of us, but not so large that a third tenant could go unnoticed. I asked Mr. Cunningham about that once. He smiled and said, "Eyes have they but they see not. Ears have they . . . You are a very special person, my dear Alice."

It's true that Mother, over the years, became more and more wrapped up in enjoying her misery. She never tired of telling me what a wastrel my father was and how he'd squandered my inheritance and left us both high and dry, and herself hardly able to hold her head up among the prominent people of the town. I didn't dare to disagree with her, but I remembered my father as a large laughing man who smelled of horses and cigars and another pungent odor which I later recognized as bourbon whiskey.

When I reached my junior year in high school, Mother reluctantly permitted me the company of boys. There weren't many who asked, and I admitted to myself that there was something slightly intimidating about my presence. I was tall and pale, thin to the point of emaciation, and, perhaps through my long association with Mr. Cunningham, seemed always on the verge of disappearing into the beyond. My nickname at school—you can see it in my yearbook—was "The Spook."

There were a few who were not put off by this, were perhaps morbidly attracted. But they never called on me more than once after Mother had put them through an inquisition on their family antecedents, their prospects for the future, and their intentions for the evening.

On the other hand, I could not resist comparing them with Mr. Cunningham. When I met him, you will remember, I was only eleven years old and he was a spirit in the prime of manhood. He seemed old enough to be my father. In actual years I suppose he was old enough to be my great-grandfather. But when I reached 16 I looked at his curling chestnut hair, his gentle gray-blue eyes, his courtly manner in a somewhat different light. The boys at school seemed rudely healthy, oafish, and awkward by comparison. Mr. Cunningham read poetry in a melancholy voice. Andy Pennell laughed

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boisterously at the one movie we attended together. It came down to this—Abbott and Costello vs. Shelley and Keats. No contest. I fell in love.

"Mr. Cunningham," I said one evening after I'd washed the dinner dishes and done my homework, "you've been visiting me in my room for five years. You've listened to my troubles, you've dried my tears, and you've been a good friend. Yet you've never told me why it is you haunt this particular room. No one else has ever seen you. There are no stories of this house being haunted. Why do you appear here, and only to me?"

He sighed then and settled down in his favorite corner of the window seat. "My dear child," he said, in a voice both dreamy and reminiscent. "My dear child, you are old enough now to understand how it is between men and women. I am speaking, dear Alice, of love. Once I loved a lady. It was long ago, long before you were born, or your mother, or even her mother. I met my lady when I was a soldier and it was as a soldier I married her. The war was over by then, but there was fighting to be done out west. I was young and adventuresome as well as being in love. So I married my darling Elizabeth, and after a brief honeymoon, installed her in this house with my devoted family and went out to the Wyoming Territory to fight the Sioux.

"There was no question but that my family adored Elizabeth. Who wouldn't? She was a pretty, tiny thing with long golden hair that reached almost to the floor. But more than that, she was cheerful, modest, and well-spoken, always ready to read to an invalid, help my mother with the gardening, or replace a missing button on my father's waistcoats. In short, my father doted on her and my mother regarded her from the very beginning as the daughter she'd never had.

"While I was out in the west, learning that the war with the Indians was less the noble adventure I had thought and more a matter of cruelty and greed and broken promises against a people whose only desire was to be left in peace on the land they regarded as belonging to no one but for the use of all . . . oh, my dear Alice, I have seen women and children slaughtered. But that's another story, and we are speaking of Elizabeth. While I was out west she wrote to me, long letters full of loving detail about her daily life. It wasn't long before, in one of those letters, she informed me that she was to have a child. Our child."

He paused and gazed at me with melancholy eyes. "I trust I am

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not offending you in speaking of these matters."

"Oh, never," I protested. "Please go on." I knew, of course, where babies came from, although if Mother knew I knew, she would surely have a conniption.

"I applied instantly for leave to go home," he continued, "but the increasing horde of settlers, railroad builders, traders, and opportunity seekers needed all the protection they could get. My application was refused. Elizabeth's letters continued. She wrote me the news of our town and delicately of her great joy at the quickening of life within her. The months passed and still there was no prospect of my return. Her letters often took weeks to reach me, but they were the only comfort I had in the rough and bloody life we led in the Territory. On the very day that I received one in which she wrote humorously of the difficulty she had in finding clothes to fit—she referred to herself as a roly-poly little barrel—I also received a telegram. Elizabeth was dead. The child was stillborn. My father urged me to return as quickly as possible.

"My first instinct was to ride recklessly in our next foray against the Indians, exposing myself to their arrows and war lances. But common sense prevailed. This time my commander could not deny me leave and I set off immediately. But travel was slow and difficult in those days, and by the time I returned home Elizabeth and my son had been buried in the churchyard on the hill. You can still see their gravemarker.

"I comforted my parents as well as I could, but when I learned from them the agonies my darling girl had suffered, there was no comfort for me. She was tiny, as I told you, and not much older than you are now. The baby was large. My mother, pale and aged ten years since last I saw her, told me of the hopelessness she read upon the doctor's face when he realized the baby was turned the wrong way round for an easy birth. The struggle went on for hours. There was nothing anyone could do."

He turned to me once more and the pain of remembrance written on his ashen face brought tears to my own eyes.

"Have I shocked you?" he inquired gently.

"No," I murmured, reaching for a handkerchief. "I'm glad you told me."

"It all happened here in this room," he said, glancing round at the four walls and the furniture we had brought with us five years before. "It's changed since then. Our marriage bed stood where yours is now. The wallpaper was different. We had a Turkey carpet on the

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floor. Elizabeth's fine embroidery was everywhere." His voice faded and he seemed lost in reverie.

My own curiosity, I'm ashamed to say, was still not satisfied. As deeply as I pitied him for his tragic history, I still wanted to know how he came to be a youthful spirit visible, as far as I could tell, only to me.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"What happened then?" he repeated. "Why, life became a sickening burden. I was already dismayed over the course of my western adventures. I had, at the command of my superiors, taken several lives, although I tried always to spare the women and their children. My companions were not inclined to be merciful. I began to view Elizabeth's death as retribution. I blamed myself. I grew morose. I had nightmares in which Elizabeth appeared as a squaw with a cradle board on her back and I with a rifle in my hands was compelled to shoot her while she looked at me with trusting eyes. I began drinking heavily. One night, in the grip of despair, I swallowed poison and lay myself down on the very bed in which Elizabeth had died to share her fate."

"Oh, horrible," I sobbed. "But were you never reunited?"

"Never. And here I have waited in this room for someone who would forgive me my cowardice in taking my own life when I should have borne my woes courageously and lived to be a dutiful son to my parents whose loss, by my death, was greater than mine. Perhaps I should even have married again and brought joy to their old age with grandchildren."

I could scarcely speak, so full of forgiveness was I for this lost soul. "Am I the one?" I whispered.

"You are a fine sensitive young woman," he replied. "Go to sleep now. I hope I have not distressed you with my story."

He vanished then, as was his habit, not quickly, but by degrees growing ever more transparent until he faded from sight and only his pitiable words whirling round in my brain remained as evidence of his presence.

I went to bed, vowing eternal devotion to Mr. Cunningham. There would be no more movie dates with Andy Pennell or anyone else. My love was pure and timeless and as unshakable as the pyramids of Egypt. I wept, but they were delicious tears as satisfying and uplifting as a sermon by Dr. Clinch of the Presbyterian Church. I would live my life in this room, endeavoring to bring what happiness I could to my ghostly visitor.

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And so the years went by. I finished high school and refused to go away to college, instead qualifying myself as a librarian at a local academy. I knew, Mother had often told me, that I would have to find some means of supporting myself since, as she put it, I could not hope to marry well, if at all. But marriage was the furthest thing from my mind, unless it could be . . . But that was inconceivable. Mr. Cunningham never mentioned the possibility of marriage, and Dr. Clinch could hardly be expected to perform a ceremony uniting a living member of his congregation with a ghostly presence, one which, in all probability, he couldn't even see.

As I have said, Mr. Cunningham was a gentleman. He took great care never to appear in my room unless I was fully clothed. Although he often sat at the foot of my bed once I was propped on my pillows and decently covered by the bedclothes, he never said or did a single thing that could be regarded as improper. We read to each other a great deal. In fact, Mother sometimes complained that I spent more time talking to myself in my room than in talking to her. And I brought him the gossip of the town, news of families whose forebears had been his contemporaries.

He enjoyed listening to the radio, and when television came along, he became hopelessly addicted. He especially liked "Gunsmoke." By this time I had obtained a post at the public library and was able to buy a television set for him and one for Mother as well. Mother scarcely left the apartment any more, except to do the shopping and go to church. She had no friends left, and although she blamed them for having dropped her when our fortunes declined, I suspect that she drove them away with her constant self-pity over the plight in which my father had left us. The years did nothing to soften her view or change her tune.

One May morning—I had by then advanced to the position of Head Librarian—I awoke and dressed and went into the kitchen only to find that Mother had not yet put the kettle on for tea. I knocked on her bedroom door and when there was no answer, I opened it and peered in. Mother lay in her bed, her white hair disheveled, a twisted grimace on her face. Her eyes were open and unblinking. I sighed and went to phone the doctor, but I knew it was no use.

When it was all over and Mother had been carried away to Simmie's Funeral Home around the corner, I stood for several quiet minutes in front of the mirror that hung opposite the apartment door. It was an old mirror, but then the face that looked back at me

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from its reflecting surface was old, too. My hair was streaked with gray and had coarsened over the years. My thin cheeks lacked color and there were lines radiating from my eyes that had not been caused by a lifetime of laughter. I realized that we had lived in the apartment in the old Cunningham house for over 30 years.

I telephoned the library to tell my assistant what had happened and that I would not be in that day and probably not the next one either. Then I went to sort through Mother's belongings.

The ringing of the doorbell was a shock. So few people ever came to call, and the afternoon had been so quiet and filled with memories as I looked at old photographs and read the letters Mother had saved. Despite all the years of maligning my dead father, it was apparent that at one time my mother had loved him very much and that they had had a life together about which I knew nothing. The pictures showed them smiling at each other at race tracks, on the decks of ocean vessels, on beaches in voluminous bathing costumes, and dressed elegantly for balls. I felt a twinge of envy. All I had was Mr. Cunningham.

The doorbell rang again and I went to answer it. It was Melissa, my assistant at the library.

"I brought you this," she said. She stood in the open doorway offering me a baking dish covered with aluminum foil. "I didn't know if you would feel like cooking anything for your supper and I just happened to have this already prepared. I love to cook but I have no one to cook for, so sometimes I make up one of my favorite recipes and have it for dinner all week. Please take it. All you have to do is stick it in the oven for a little while." She placed the baking dish in my hands.

"Won't you come in?" I said.

"Well, only for a minute," she answered. "I don't want to intrude."

That was typical of Melissa. I had hired her at the library because she was quiet and dressed modestly. She had turned out to be efficient and sensitive, too. We got along well together. As she stepped into the apartment, which she had never visited before, she glanced quickly in both directions as people will who are entering strange premises.

"Oh," she said, "I didn't realize you had company."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "There's no one here."

She gestured vaguely in the direction of my bedroom. "I thought I saw someone. A young man." She blushed.

"It's getting dark," I said. "It was probably just a shadow. Come

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with me to the kitchen and show me what I should do with this."

I am not much of a cook. Mother had taken care of all that. In the kitchen I lifted the foil wrapping and saw that the baking dish contained a delicious looking mixture of chicken and vegetables in a thick sauce. I was suddenly very hungry. And lonely.

"Won't you stay and help me eat this?" I asked Melissa. "It looks wonderful."

"If you're sure you want me to," she replied hesitantly. "I wouldn't like to impose on you in your sorrow."

So like her. A sweet child. "Mother was old," I told her. "She didn't get much pleasure out of life. If she had lived through the stroke, she would have been a great misery to herself. The doctor said it was a blessing that she was taken off so quickly. Still, I shall miss her."

Melissa turned the oven on and set the chicken to warm. She asked me for an apron, and I gave her one of Mother's. Then she rummaged in the refrigerator and found some salad greens. She showed me how to break them up into the salad bowl, and while I was doing that, she found flour and shortening and with quick white hands punched up a batch of biscuits. As she worked, I watched her.

She was much shorter than I, frail-looking as if she had been undernourished as a child. Her hair was pulled back severely and braided into a knot at the back of her head. She wore round wire-rimmed eyeglasses which magnified her eyes and gave her a permanently startled expression. She was dressed demurely in a simple skirt and blouse, part of a series which she alternated throughout the week. The blouse had a high neck with a bow at the throat and was made of a white fabric sprigged with tiny blue flowers. The skirt was blue and hung from her small waist to just below her knees. She wore flat-heeled black leather slippers with rounded toes and small decorative bows.

During supper she told me something of her life. She came from a large country family in the southern part of the state. There was a farm, but it wasn't very productive. She was the youngest child and only daughter. Two of her brothers and her father worked the farm, a third brother had joined the Navy, while the youngest boy, who was just a year older than she, was confined to a wheelchair and spent his time carving small wooden animals. She promised to bring me one of them. She, herself, was expected to marry one of the many cousins who lived near the farm, but she wasn't sure she wanted to do that. He was handsome enough, but crude and un-

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mannerly, and never read anything but farm journals and motorcycle magazines.

"Are you happy at the library?" I asked her.

"Oh, my, yes," she said softly. "All those books. It's like being a child in a candy store where everything is free."

"And where do you live?"

She looked down at her plate. "I have a room. It's not much. I try to send some money home every week. But I do have kitchen privileges." She smiled up at me. "I borrow cookbooks from the library. I'm really learning a lot about cooking."

"You'll make someone a good wife."

At that she frowned. "I don't know about that. I've never known anyone I really wanted to marry, not even Cousin Billy. I've met a few men here in town." She shivered slightly. "They all seem so . . ."

"Coarse?"

"Well . . ."

Melissa left after we washed the dishes together and I complimented her on her cooking. An idea had been flickering around in my mind, but I wanted to talk it over with Mr. Cunningham first. And I had no notion if Melissa would agree.

He came after I had buttoned myself into my nightgown and climbed into bed with two pillows at my back and the reading light on. I had with me my volume of Shakespeare's Sonnets, and most particularly wanted to read aloud Number 22, the one that begins, "My glass shall not persuade me I am old, So long as youth and thou are of one date . . ." But he sat himself in the window seat and gazed moodily out at the night.

"A penny for your thoughts," I said.

He sighed and turned to me. "You're all alone now, dear Alice. You have no one."

"I have you."

"You should have had a better life. I've been very selfish, keeping you for myself. Where is your husband? Where are the children you would have cherished?"

"You are all the husband I have ever wanted."

He smiled at that, but his smile seemed tinged with sadness. He shook his head as if to say he did not deserve such devotion, and in the soft light of the reading lamp his chestnut curls gleamed warmly. I longed to stroke his head and hold it to my breast.

"You had a visitor tonight," he said. "Who was she?"

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"I wanted to talk to you about her. She's a sweet child who works at the library. She lives alone in a sordid little room somewhere. I'd like to ask her to move in here. She could have Mother's room. Would you mind?"

He flickered and almost disappeared. I thought he was angry. For the first time in our long years together I felt I had offended him. But his face, when he returned to full visibility, was calm and thoughtful.

"It's not for me to say, dear Alice. This is your home. You must do what you think best."

"But you live here, too. Please say yes. She would be like our daughter. I'm very fond of her and I'm sure you will be, too, once you get to know her."

He shrugged. "Perhaps. She seems a harmless little creature. If it will make you happy, that's all that matters."

"Thank you, Mr. Cunningham. And now, shall we read?"

But although I read with what I thought was tender feeling, Mr. Cunningham seemed abstracted and he soon began to grow transparent and left without his usual fond goodnight.

Melissa was delighted with the idea. After a week in which Mother's poorly attended funeral was held, and I brightened up her room with new curtains and a cheerful flower-printed bedspread, Melissa moved in with her sparse belongings. I had feared that, being sensitive, she would have some aversion to occupying a room in which someone had died.

"No," she said soberly, "my Granny died in the midst of all of us. It's part of living, isn't it?"

The arrangement worked perfectly. We walked to the library together each morning. In exchange for her room and board Melissa did the shopping and cooking and a much better job of it she did than Mother ever managed. Melissa was pleased that she was able to send a little more money home and still have something left to spend on herself. She indulged in a few small frivolities—a pretty ruffled summer dress in which she looked more than ever like an old-fashioned girl, a pair of antique earrings of no great value but which suited her style. I gave her Mother's tortoiseshell dresser set which she had admired. One night I passed her open bedroom door and saw her brushing her hair. Unbound, it fell almost to the floor in thick rippling waves of gold. She was quite pretty without her glasses.

Mr. Cunningham, too, seemed pleased. When he sat at the foot

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of my bed, his warm smiles and tender glances touched my heart with joy. At last I had a family of my own. Mr. Cunningham, my "husband" of 30 years. And Melissa, my lovely young "daughter." I only hoped that Mr. Cunningham was not hurt by the fact that more and more often I fell asleep over my book of poetry. No longer could I stay awake half of the night, sharing in the purity of our devotion to each other. It was, I knew, the effect of the passing years, but I was reluctant to offer him this excuse.

One night, after Melissa had been with us for a couple of months, I was awakened out of a deep sleep. The reading lamp was still on and my book lay face down and open on the floor. Perhaps it had just that moment slipped from my fingers and the noise it made hitting the floor had jolted me awake. I reached for the lamp switch, but before I could plunge the room into darkness I heard a voice softly murmuring.

"Oh, Dan. Danny, darling. How terribly I love you."

Had I been dreaming? Years ago I had had dreams in which I had spoken my love for Mr. Cunningham, words which I had never dared utter in his presence. I switched off the light. And then I heard his answering voice.

"Melissa, dearest. Come away with me."

It was a hot summer night. My window was open. Melissa's window would be open, too. Voices floated on the still night air. I crept out of bed and silently crossed the room. I eased my door open and walked out into the hall. At the door to the next room, Melissa's room, I paused and listened. The voices continued, but I could not make out the words through the thick door. I put my hand on the knob and slowly turned. The door moved quietly on heavy brass hinges. I looked in.

Moonlight, starlight, a glow from the night sky filtered into the room through the branches of the tall old elm beyond the window. Chestnut curls glistened. Light fell on a golden cascade of hair. Close, so close. Pale arms curved. The rest was in darkness. I closed the door and went away.

In the morning Melissa looked no different from the way she usually did. Her hair was tightly braided and her glasses were in place. She chatted, as she made breakfast, of the new books which we had ordered, of the summer-time storytelling sessions in the children's room. When I made no response, she peered at me, innocently puzzled.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

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"A headache," I replied. "I didn't sleep too well."

"Can I get you something? Aspirin?"

"No, thank you. But if you think you can manage without me today, I'd like to stay home."

"Oh, no problem. Why don't you just go back to bed and I'll bring you some tea and toast before I leave? It's probably the weather, so hot and humid."

"Thank you, Melissa. I think I'll do that."

Back in bed, with the tea cooling and the toast growing soggy with melted butter on a tray beside me, I waited. Throughout the long morning I waited, willing him to appear. In the afternoon the skies grew dark and the air thickened with the impending storm. He came with the first drops of rain, materializing on the window seat with his hand raised as if to trace the path of the raindrops down the pane.

"Mr. Cunningham," I said. "What have you done?"

He cocked his head slightly, boyishly, and grinned at me. "Are you angry with me?"

His words hurt more than the scene I had witnessed the night before. How could I be angry with him? I loved him. I had devoted my whole life to him. Mortified, I felt the hot tears running down my cheeks.

"There, there," he said, offering me one of my own handkerchiefs. "Don't cry. I couldn't help it. Melissa is so like my own darling Elizabeth. I fell in love with her the instant I saw her. And she loves me."

"But what about me?" I cried. "I love you. I've loved you for thirty years."

"That's just it, don't you see. Melissa is young. If she comes with me now, we'll both be young together forever."

"You mean—you mean you want her to die for you?"

"There's no other way. But she can't quite make up her mind."

"I would have died for you. Anytime through the years. I'd die for you this minute."

He crossed the room in that swift ghostly way of his and picked up the hand mirror from my dressing table.

"No!" I cried.

"Look!" he commanded, pressing the mirror into my hand.

I looked. It was worse than I had feared. The face that gaped back at me was marred by disappointment. The thin-lipped mouth turned down in an ugly curve causing the chin to pucker. The eyes were

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sunken into caverns of darkness. The hair, cropped short for the sake of convenience, stood away from the head in stiff gray-streaked quills. I understood. It was bitter, but I understood.

"You must help her decide," he said.

"What! You want me to convince her to commit suicide?"

"I'm afraid that won't do. We've talked it over endlessly. She loves me but she's unalterably opposed to taking her own life. You must decide for her."

I stared at him. When my voice returned, I could not recognize it as my own. "You want me to kill her."

"My dear Alice, I've never known you to be so indelicate. All I ask is that you help her to a greater happiness than she will ever know with a mortal companion. Think of all the years we've spent together. Were they not happy? Did you not say that you would die for me this minute? And you won't do this little thing? I believe you're jealous."

"No," I groaned. "I'm not jealous. It's only that she's so young."

"Yes." He smiled. "And she'll remain young forever. Young and well-beloved. Is that not worth dying for?"

He disappeared then, more quickly than was his habit. I lay for a while listening to the rain that fell heavily outside my window. It was late afternoon but already as dark as night. Melissa would be soaked by the time she returned from the library. I decided that I would try my hand at preparing our supper so that she could rest when she got home.

I got out of bed and dressed, and while in the bathroom I noticed the box of medications I had taken from Mother's room. It was quite a collection, both patent medicines and prescriptions. Mother had suffered from many minor ailments—arthritis, sleeplessness, indigestion. And she had pills and potions for each. I picked out a vial, hardly used, of parti-colored capsules.

A nice hot soup, I thought, would take the chill off, followed by a salad of canned pears and cottage cheese. I set the table, using the family china which Mother had saved for special occasions. I could not remember ever having had a special occasion, but this certainly was one. I opened the necessary cans, set the soup to warm, and arranged the pears on dainty lettuce leaves.

When Melissa came in she was drenched. The morning had been clear and she had neglected to carry an umbrella.

"My dear child," I said. "You must get out of those wet clothes quickly before you catch cold. Supper's all ready."

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"Oh, how pretty," she exclaimed, looking in at the table. I had lit candles in silver candlesticks and placed as a centerpiece a bowl of artificial daisies. They looked quite real in the candlelight.

While she was changing, I dished out the soup. I had already picked open all the capsules in the vial and had about a teaspoonful of a grainy white powder. The empty capsules I had flushed away down the commode. The powder disappeared quite readily into the thick soup. It was pea soup, one of Melissa's favorites.

She came to the table in her dressing gown, with her damp hair unbound. She never wore her glasses at meals, claiming that hot food steamed them up so that she couldn't see what she was eating. She looked so gentle and pretty, like a child from another age. As she raised the first spoonful to her lips I almost murmured, "Stop!" But the word would not come, and instead I took up my own spoon.

When we finished, Melissa yawned, covering her mouth politely.

"You must be tired," I said. "I'll do the dishes and you go off to bed."

"Oh, I hate to leave you with the cleaning up," she said. Her eyelids were drooping.

"Nonsense. I've been resting all day."

"Then I think I will. I'm suddenly so sleepy."

Mr. Cunningham did not come to me that night. I waited, wide-awake, through the long hours, wishing I had saved at least one of the capsules for myself. There were no voices from the room next door. In the gray light before the dawn I got out of bed and crept down the hall. Again I opened Melissa's door silently and peered in. He knelt beside her bed, his head bowed, his ghostly hand clasping her small white one. She lay still. As far as I could tell, there was not the slightest rise and fall of the thin coverlet that lay across her breast. I went back to bed until the proper time for rising.

In the morning it was much as it had been for Mother. I telephoned the doctor. It was he who found the empty vial on her bedside table. And the note.

"Alice," he scolded, "I prescribed these sleeping pills for your mother. Why didn't you throw them away?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "What could have made her do it? She was so young, so pretty, she had everything to live for. She never mentioned any trouble."

And then he read the note aloud—the note I had so carefully written early that morning in a fair approximation of Melissa's round schoolgirlish hand. "I'm sorry to do this, but there just isn't

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any other way. I thought I would never be lonely, but he went and here I am. I can't bear my life without him."

I wept, but not even I could tell whether my tears were for Melissa or myself. The note was true. I was sorry and I had lost him.

Her people came, grim-faced but stoically accepting yet another in the long line of births and deaths. Her mother, a thin, small, brown-faced woman with gray hair pulled back and braided just like Melissa's, thanked me gravely for taking an interest in her daughter.

"It wasn't your fault," she said. "Melissa was proud and kept her feelings to herself. She must have been hurting pretty bad, but she'd never have let anyone know. Sooner die."

Cousin Billy blustered and threatened to find the man responsible and beat him to a bloody pulp. I knew he would never find him this side of the grave.

They took Melissa's body home to the country graveyard, but before the sad procession left, I asked to be allowed a moment alone with her. Her golden hair lay spread on the satin pillow, her mouth, just faintly tinted pink, was curved into a gentle smile.

"I hope you'll both be happy now," I whispered to her cold ear and pressed my lips to her brow.

I insisted on paying the funeral expenses and the cost of transporting Melissa to her country grave. I sent along a wreath of orange blossoms. For a bride.

And I went home to my empty apartment.

I never saw Mr. Cunningham again. But often in the night, on nights when I cannot sleep and they are many, I hear voices in the next room. Happy, laughing voices. I keep the door to that room closed and I never creep down the hall to open it silently and peer in.

I am thinking of asking the doctor for some sleeping pills.

"Q"

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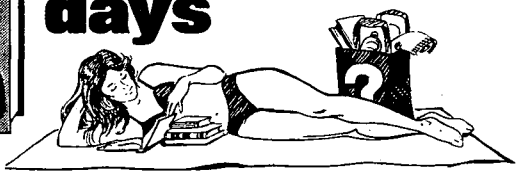
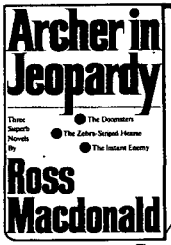
# Chillers for hot summer days





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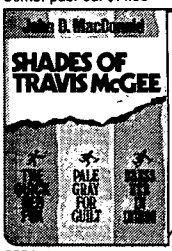


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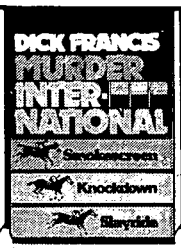


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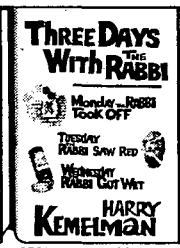


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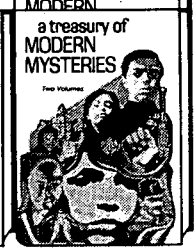


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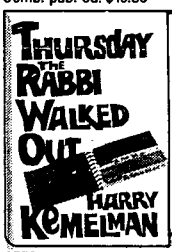


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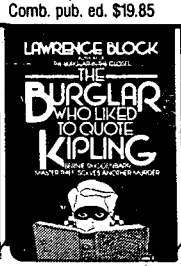


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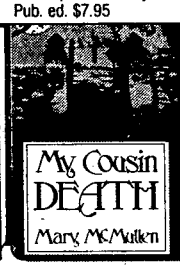


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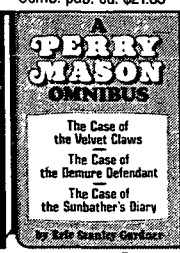
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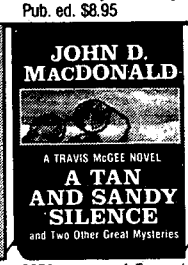


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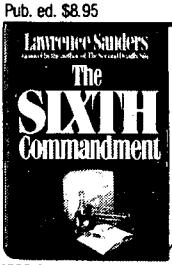


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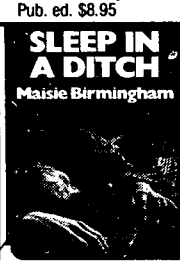


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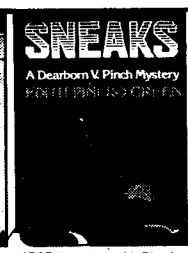


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## DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

*This is the 553rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . in which T. William Pine, who was "pretty good at making deals," drives a hard bargain . . .*

*The author, Richard Ciciarelli, is single, in his early thirties, and he teaches junior high-school English in a village in central New York State. He "got hooked on mysteries at the age of twelve." In almost no time he "had graduated to the 'big league'," and now his mystery library "contains almost every book written by Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, and Rex Stout as well as a considerable number by Carter Dickson-John Dickson Carr."*

*In his spare time Mr. Ciciarelli enjoys reading anything he can get his hands on and "athletics (both coaching and participating)" . . .*

# A HARD BARGAIN

**by RICHARD CICIARELLI**

T. William Pine opened his eyes to see a stranger sitting next to his bed.

"Who are you?" T. William demanded. "How did you get in here?"

"I think you know me, Mr. Pine," the visitor replied.

T. William looked over the man who had invaded his bedroom. He was immaculately dressed in a perfectly tailored dark-brown suit. The three-piece affair was complemented by a beige shirt and chocolate tie. The visitor's hair was fashionably long and black, slightly graying at the temples. Sharply defined eyebrows arched over glowing, emerald-green eyes. A pencil-thin mustache sat just under an aquiline nose, and a pointed chin and high cheekbones completed the stranger's thin ruddy face. The man leaned slightly forward, both hands loosely curled around the gold head of a shiny ebony cane.

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"I've never seen you before!" T. William exclaimed. "Who in hell are you?"

"I never said you've seen me," the stranger said calmly. "I said you know me. As for your second question, in Hell I am Master. You may know me as Old Ned, Old Scratch, Old Harry, or any of a dozen other sobriquets."

T. William's eyebrows went up a notch. He suddenly recognized the faint odor his nose had detected a few moments ago.

"Am I dreaming?"

"Oh, no," his guest assured him, "this is no dream. It is really I."

"Why are you here?" T. William asked.

"Why do I ever appear on earth?" Asmodeus answered with another question.

T. William's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, "You mean you want my—"

Satan smiled.

"I've heard stories that you've made deals with humans before," T. William said. "Is that true?"

Lucifer nodded. "There were a few bargains struck in the past," he admitted.

"And you want to make a deal with me?" T. William's eyes glowed with excitement. He sat up in bed, rubbing his ancient hands together. "I'm pretty good at making deals, you know."

"I'm aware of your past, Mr. Pine. Born of lower-class parents, you quit school at the age of fourteen, got a job as a box boy in a grocery store, and through sheer determination worked up to manager, then owner, then owner of a chain of supermarkets. Truly an inspiring tale. However, that's—"

"I know," T. William interrupted, "that's all in the past. I drove some hard bargains back then and you think I've lost my touch, grown soft living in all this luxury."

"Not really, no," Satan murmured.

"Good. Because I've still got the old wits, you know. Now, I'm not a particularly religious man—never have been."

"I know that. That's why I'm here." Mephisto smiled again.

"Well, anyhow, I'm not at all concerned about my soul. What I worry about is my mortal flesh."

"Most people do," Asmodeus agreed.

"All right, then," T. William said. "We know where we both stand. You want my soul and I want certain—er—pleasures of the flesh, shall we say?"

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"Mr. Pine," Beelzebub began, "I don't think—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" T. William interrupted again. "You're not going to set any rules this time. If you want my soul, I spell out all the stipulations."

Satan sat back, grinning.

"Go ahead," he said. "Start spelling."

T. William took a few moments to deliberate.

"Okay," he said finally. "First of all, I'm not a young man any more. Seventy-five years may not seem long to you, but it's a good stretch to a mortal, and, as you can see, those three-quarters of a century have taken their toll of me."

The Devil looked at T. William's bald pate, fringed about the ears with stringy gray. The wrinkled countenance and gnarled, arthritic hands attested to the truth of T. William's statement.

"I want my youth back," T. William stated flatly. "I want to look young and handsome. Give me back my black curly hair. Give me back my slim muscular physique. Take away the wrinkles, the arthritis, the aches and pains. For as long as I live."

"Others before you have asked for that," Mephistopheles mused.

"I'm not asking. I'm demanding. And that's not all. I want perfect health, too. A new outer body is no good without a youthful inner one. Perhaps your past bargaining opponents forgot that detail. I didn't."

"A good observation. Most of them did overlook that point."

"I'm still not finished," T. William informed his demonic visitor. "While I was growing older I was so busy building my career, so concerned with burying my competition, I never had time for the finer things. I never read the classics, never had a moment to pause and admire fine art or listen to beautiful music."

"And you want that opportunity?" Asmodeus asked.

"No. I want the knowledge," T. William replied. "I want instilled as part of my being all those things I mentioned. I want to know all the things I missed so I can converse intelligently about them."

"Instilled as part of your being—well, it saves a lot of time, I guess," Satan shrugged. "Young looks, youthful health, classical knowledge—is there anything else you'd like?"

T. William Pine grinned a toothless grin. "I've saved the best for last. I know that in return for all this I have to give you my soul, that I have to die. Well, my last demand is that I get to choose when that happens. I, and I alone, am to determine when I die."

"Ahhh," Lucifer lingered over that utterance. "That, I'm afraid,

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I cannot grant you."

"Why not? Are you afraid I'd like my new way of living so much that I may choose to continue it forever?"

"Hardly, Mr. Pine." Old Nick shook his head. "You mortals have a habit of tiring of things—including life—after a few short decades. No, that's not my reason."

"Then what?" T. William demanded.

"Mr. Pine," Satan said patiently, "I tried to explain something to you earlier, but you interrupted me. I came here to take your soul, yes, but not to make a deal."

T. William was confused. His scraggly gray eyebrows pulled together and his head sank back onto his pillow.

"You see, Mr. Pine," the Prince of Darkness explained, "you're already dead. You died in your sleep."

"Q"

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*A story that is "different" . . . Riggs had to remind himself never to get friendly with a target: always keep it impersonal, objective . . .*

# THE FINAL GAME PLAN

by JERROLD PHAON

As soon as the gum lost its flavor, Riggs spit it out, wadded it up in an empty wrapper, and tossed it into an overflowing ashtray. He replaced the stale gum with a fresh stick, rolling it up before popping it into his mouth. All the time he kept his eyes on the man sitting at a table nearby.

He'd been watching this man every night for the past week. The man didn't know that Riggs had been observing him, had been coming in and blending into the background and watching, and waiting, and the man certainly didn't know that very shortly Riggs planned to kill him.

It was nothing personal. A week ago Riggs had never even seriously considered killing anyone. There were times, of course, when he would think about killing someone—as when he found out Kate was dumping him—but that only happened in moments of rage. He never took the urge seriously. But now things were different, had been different ever since that night he'd taken a phone call and received an anonymous offer to murder someone for money.

At first Riggs thought it was a practical joke—one of his buddies trying to put one over on him. He laughed derisively into the receiver and said, "Yeah, sure, pal. Suppose I start with you?"

He was going to hang up, but something about the caller's voice troubled him. The voice was too cultured, too smooth, to belong to one of his buddies. And the voice, unperturbed, was saying, "I'm serious, Mr. Riggs. I represent a powerful man. He wants a job done in a particular way. We feel you are capable of doing that job. I had presumed you wanted to make a name for yourself, wanted to go places. Perhaps I presumed wrong—"

"Wait," Riggs said. "I'm listening." He took out a stick of gum and

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popped it into his mouth. He began chewing viciously. The caller filled him in with a spotty outline of the plan. When he finished, Riggs asked, "How much you going to pay?"

"Five thousand dollars. Half now. The other half when the job is completed."

So he had fallen into the agreement more or less the same way he had fallen into every other criminal act of his life, a career that had begun at 13 when he stole his first car and led him into his current occupation as a runner for Bimmy Merkel. He had stolen that car not because he consciously wanted to steal it, but simply because a careless owner had parked his car on a quiet street and left the keys in the ignition. The opportunity had presented itself and Riggs had followed his instincts.

Ten years later, with a background in small-time hustling and burglary, opportunity knocked again when one of Bimmy's runners got picked up and Riggs happened to be at the right place at the right time. For two years now Riggs had been working steadily on the bottom rung of an organization that he knew controlled the criminal interests of the entire city, and he had begun to get restless for another opportunity to knock, one that would start him on his way up the ladder. This was his chance.

But he was nervous, kept chewing one stick of gum after another while he waited for the man to finish his drink and leave. He always chewed gum when he felt nervous or edgy, a habit he'd developed after he'd quit smoking. Kate had often teased him about this: "With other men I worry about their cigarette butts in the ashtray. But with you, I'm always afraid my husband is going to find one of your gum wrappers under the pillow."

Thinking about Kate calmed him, and then the waitress was hovering over him with his drink, his second of the evening, a sauterne on the rocks. The waitress was pretty, built like Kate, although definitely lacking Kate's classiness—and she leaned way down when she set the glass on the table so that Riggs got a good view down her front. She smiled and said, "Can I get you anything else?" in a provocative voice. He smiled back, but shook his head. No. He couldn't afford to do or say anything that would cause the waitress to remember him. Her eyes held his a moment longer than was necessary, and then she dabbed at the table with her cloth and backed away.

Riggs returned his attention to his target, a man whose name was Hollis and whose pattern, during the week that Riggs had been

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following him, had never deviated: he entered the same cocktail lounge each night at precisely 9:30, had five bourbons on the rocks, and left at 11:30, slightly drunk. He went straight to an elegant apartment building over on Lycoming and disappeared inside.

He seemed to be a rather nondescript sort of man, in late middle age, financially well off, and very boring. But somebody wanted him dead, which meant that somewhere he had made an enemy. Kate was married to a man similar to Hollis, interested only in power and money and afternoons at his exclusive club. Riggs could understand why she was so lonely, why she needed to go from one man to the next. Well, tonight he planned to finish with Hollis and collect the rest of his money, and then maybe he'd do a job on Kate's husband, *gratis*.

He could feel his nerves getting jumpy again, and he spit out the stale gum and reached for a fresh stick. But the open pack wasn't on the table or in any of his pockets. That rattled him, because it was a fresh pack, one of those jumbos, and he was sure he'd put it on the table, right by the ashtray.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw his target, Hollis, push back his drink and slide out of the booth. Riggs glanced at his watch, noting it was only 11:10. For some reason Hollis was breaking his pattern. There would be no time for Riggs to get a fresh pack of gum. He put some money on the table and followed.

Hollis was unlocking his car when Riggs caught up to him in the parking lot. "Mr. Hollis?" he said easily. Hollis turned, looked at Riggs with a bewildered, slightly drunk expression. Riggs scanned the parking lot, saw that they were alone, and moved closer.

"What do you want?" Hollis asked.

"You and I have some business to attend to," Riggs said. His tone was light, carefree. Then he drew back his coat so that Hollis could see the gun.

"What is this?" Hollis demanded angrily.

"Just shut up and toss me your car keys." Hollis tossed the keys over the roof of the car and Riggs finished unlocking the doors. They got into the car and Riggs tossed the keys back to Hollis. Then he took out his gun and rested it on his lap. He said, "You know what'll happen if you don't do exactly as I tell you?"

Hollis nodded.

"Good," Riggs said. "Start the car and drive out of the parking lot nice and easy. I'll tell you where to go."

"Who are you?" Hollis asked.

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"A friend of a friend who is awfully anxious to talk to you. Now shut up and drive."

At 11:23 Hollis turned off South Hyland and parked in an alley next to a warehouse owned by Hollis' company. He cut the lights and turned off the ignition. "Now what?" he said dully. He gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead.

Riggs put his back against the door and leveled the gun at Hollis' middle. "We wait," he said. This was the part about the job that Riggs liked the least. The client wanted to talk to Hollis before Riggs finished him. Riggs didn't like it because it exposed him, left him out in the open. And it was dangerous for the client as well. The best way, Riggs figured, was to stalk the target, find out where he went, what he did, get to know his habits. People were predictable. When he located the best place to finish the job, he'd just wait until the target showed up on schedule and then *ping!* Money in the bank. That's the way Riggs planned to operate after this job.

"Who put the contract out on me?" Hollis asked.

"Why ask me?" Riggs said. He hated the waiting and he wanted a stick of gum. "You must have made an enemy somewhere."

"How much are you being paid?"

"Don't worry about it," Riggs answered.

"I'll double it," Hollis said. "Just name a figure."

"Forget it," Riggs snapped.

"Name your price!"

"Shut up!" Riggs said. "Just shut your damn mouth." He swallowed hard and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"What are you waiting for?" Hollis asked. "Why don't you just do it and get it over with?"

"We're waiting for the man who hired me," Riggs said. "Or one of his associates. Maybe they want you to sign a new will or something."

Hollis let out a sigh and sagged back against the seat. He rolled his head on the back rest and looked at Riggs. "Since I'm a condemned man, may I smoke?"

"You smoke too much," Riggs said.

"Does it matter?" Hollis said.

"Go ahead, smoke your head off," Riggs said. He brought the gun up again and waited until Hollis had taken the cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He placed the pack on the dashboard and took one out. He lit it with the car lighter and exhaled slowly. Then he said to Riggs, "Want one?"

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"I gave it up," Riggs said. "Don't you know smoking is hazardous to your health?"

Hollis chuckled softly. "There are worse ways to go."

They waited. Hollis finished his cigarette and lit another. Riggs checked his watch and saw that it was 11:44. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "You smoke like a chimney," he complained. "I can hardly breathe in here."

"Sorry," Hollis apologized. "I chain-smoke when I'm nervous."

"I chew gum," Riggs said. "It's one of my bad habits." He smiled, thinking about what Kate had said to him, about her husband finding his gum wrappers under the pillow. He told the story to Hollis, but Hollis didn't laugh.

"I wish we could get this over with," Hollis said.

"Me too," Riggs said. He checked his watch. Eleven forty-eight. He cursed softly and fidgeted on the seat. Damn it, he could really go for one of those cigarettes. All the old urges were rushing back to him. If only he had some gum. He said to Hollis, "Hey, you got any gum on you?"

Hollis blinked open his eyes and turned. "What?"

"You got any chewing gum on you?"

"Let me check." He slid his hand into his jacket.

"Easy!" Riggs warned, bringing up the gun. "No funny business."

"I have to look for the gum."

"No sudden movements, or you're a dead man."

Hollis brought out a stick of gum. Riggs took it and unwrapped it with one hand and held the gun on Hollis with the other. He rolled it up and popped it into his mouth. "Spearmint," he said. "That's what I chew." He turned his head and glanced out the window. "I wonder what's keeping—" and then felt the constriction in his throat, felt his tongue flatten out.

He lurched forward, gagging and spitting, forcing the gum out of his mouth. He turned and gave Hollis a confused look, saw that Hollis was getting out of the car, but when he tried to bring the gun up he realized he was unable to control the muscles of his arms. He pushed his body against the door, somehow managed to open it. But he knew it was too late. He was dead even as he fell out of the car . . .

Hollis entered his apartment at precisely midnight. His wife was waiting up for him.

"How was your evening at the club, dear?" she asked, kissing him on the cheek.

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"The usual," he answered. He went to the bar and mixed himself a drink. His nerves needed a little steadying. He'd played the game awfully close. "Masterson invited me to join a foursome out at Glen Hills this Saturday. Would you mind terribly if I accept?"

"Not at all, darling."

"Did you keep yourself well occupied while I was gone, Katherine?" he asked.

"Just a quiet evening at home," she said.

He nodded and sipped his drink. She'd cleaned up well. But he was a precise man, and he could sense the minutest of changes in the atmosphere. The trace of cologne that lingered in the room was certainly not his. And there was nothing more difficult to remove from curtains than the odor of cheap cigars. Katherine really had poor taste in men when it came to choosing her lovers.

Ah, well, he thought philosophically, people had their little weaknesses; they were creatures of habit. Once he figured them out, everything else was easy. The last one had been into scuba diving, and undersea accidents were so common. And the one before that—well, one didn't want to go too far into the past.

Riggs had been a challenge, although his underworld connections were a little touchy. He didn't like dealing with criminals. The $2500 advance payment to Riggs and the rental on the apartment on Lycoming were expensive, but one had to indulge one's hobbies. He'd assumed the name Hollis, of course, so that the connection with Katherine would not be made. Paying the waitress to snatch Riggs' gum was a nice touch, speeding things up in the car. And the poisoned gum was the brilliant touch, the touch of a true master. And ironic, too, for it was a gum wrapper by a leg of the nightstand that had set him onto Riggs, bringing about the final game plan.

Now there was a new target, one, apparently, with a penchant for cheap cigars. Perhaps he could make use of that. There would be something, a habit or a mannerism, that would become the tool of the target's own destruction. He would have the new game plan figured out in due time. That was part of the fun. He loved the chase as much as the kill.

He sat down in the chair across from his wife. "Well, Kate," he said, "it looks as if I have a very busy agenda for the upcoming week. No rest for the weary." He smiled at her. She smiled back.

It wasn't a bad arrangement. As long as his wife had a lover, Hollis would always have something to keep him busy in the evenings.

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## DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

*Clements Jordan's first story—"Mr. Sweeney's Day," in our issue of December 1979—was an exceptional debut in print. Her second appearance in EQMM is another outstanding story . . .*

*If we described a story as a Western, you would know what we mean—a tale of covered wagons and stagecoaches, or of cowboys and Indians, or of range wars and rustlers, or of a shootout at high noon at the OK corral. Clements Jordan's new story is a Southern (she lives in Virginia), with a striking sense of time and place and the human condition . . .*

# POOR MISS LETTIE

**by CLEMENTS JORDAN**

Sometimes here in the city the rumbling, roaring noises become hypnotic. If I sit by the window at a certain angle and give myself over to the sounds, the landscape changes. The houses move back into yards behind fences and I am once more in the insular southern town where I grew up in the thirties. The years roll back and I remember Poor Miss Lettie, Poor Mr. Morton, and the rest.

We were everything to each other in those depression days. Through the years on drowsy summer porches, in winter groupings around the stoves, we told each other everything. Together we put a face on life, supporting each other through daily trials, borrowing and sharing possessions that grew increasingly shabby.

We were *nice* people, polite, mannered, church-going, with forebears who had fought in "the" war. If we had uncharitable words to speak, we said them softly behind palm-leaf fans or muffled them with darned-linen napkins at tea tables—and only to each other, never to outsiders. We moved protectively about our different ones, making allowances where we could, overlooking when it was impossible to explain things away.

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Lettie James was one of our different ones. When was it first realized that she "took things"? When she was four at a birthday party and everyone could laugh because she thought she ought to have a present too? In the school cloakroom when they could laugh no longer because now she was old enough to know right from wrong?

By the time Lettie was ten, she was on the list of those whom the salesclerks must watch. And it was then too that her brother Morton began to keep an eye on her—both eyes, for Lettie had become adept. He would forestall her if he could but she was so quick-moving, so nimble-fingered, so innocent-looking, that no one would realize she had struck until suddenly they no longer saw the necklace, the cologne, the little china statue—or Lettie.

Morton never confronted her in public, but nine times out of ten he would be back in the store within a day or two, holding out the article, his nice blue eyes grave as he said calmly, "Sorry." He never went into explanations and apologies and they respected him for that. He and Lettie were seldom far apart. If you saw her walking down the street, you were likely to see Morton following a short distance behind. He was only two years older than Lettie, the right age for skates and sandlot baseball, but he never had the chance to be a boy.

Lettie was by no means ostracized. She was invited to the doings of her peers. If her escort was always Morton instead of an adoring beau—well, there was no help for this. She had a thin nose and protruding teeth. Indeed, if she had not been so fortunately plain, mothers of marriageable sons might have not been so generous with their invitations.

When she reached her thirties, she became known (behind her back, of course) as "Poor Lettie," which in our circle meant she had no hopeful future. Morton became "Poor Morton," although as far as antecedents went, he was eligible enough although his hair was thinning and he had the same harassed look I had seen on the face of a toddler whose hurrying mother had towed him along as fast as his plump legs could churn. Being poor was no deterrent. But by this time their parents had died. Their older brother, Tucker, had married a girl "from away" and gone to live in her state, visiting his brother and sister but seldom. It was plain that Morton's destiny was to spend his life with Lettie. Therefore, no girl set her heart on him.

When I first became aware of the Jameses, they had grown old

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enough to be called "Miss" Lettie and "Mr." Morton by all but their contemporaries. I had acquainted myself with their former appearances from pictures. This was easy, for every home had an enormous album of keepsake photographs. He and she stood, sat, leaned against fences, porch columns, bannister rails, and posed as if dancing in literally hundreds of snapshots. They were never the bride or groom, or even members of a wedding party, never the ones blowing out candles, opening gifts, or holding the baby—but *there*—a tall, thin, sharp-nosed girl whose mouth did not close over her teeth; the taller, thin young man who never smiled, whose forehead grew more wrinkled each year.

I did not have to rely on pictures alone, however, for there were always the stories, told and retold, but essentially the same: "A shame . . . nicest parents . . . to their graves . . . poor Morton . . . stores called him nights . . . returned everything . . . kept an eye . . . always has . . . no life . . . diamond ring . . . Mrs. Allen's purse . . . Miller's store . . . ruby cuff links . . ."

I could have filled in the blanks perfectly. No number of lowered voices, significant glances, or sudden silences prevented me from learning the truth. At an early age I had learned to sit quietly, and soon the voices would pick up again, at intervals lowering for a really fan-at-the-mouth part. Poor Morton had often returned the day after a party to pay a thank-you call, and after he had gone, they would find on the table by his chair the vanity case or dressing-table ornament and return it to the owner. Nothing had been said or needed to be.

But, oh, that beautiful diamond engagement ring belonging to that visiting girl, Diane Armstrong! Why had the careless girl removed it? Had she left it on the dressing table? The bathroom basin? The piano? Had Lettie gone upstairs when the music was playing? Had she slipped inside when everyone was eating ice cream on the porch? Could the ring have fallen down the drain? The plumber could not find it. Neither could Poor Morton. He came two days after the party, thanked his hostess for her hospitality, and meeting her eyes, gravely shook his head. The visiting girl was sick. Her father (an outsider) talked of a search warrant—which would have been unthinkable. But then they learned that the ring was insured, thank goodness!

They might have been wrong about Poor Lettie after all. For what could she have done with the diamond? She would never dare to wear it. The two jewelry stores in town were alerted in case she

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tried to sell it. She never did. She had been to both of them, and though she had been watched, had taken at various times a sterling-silver lighter, a gold cigarette case, and a pretty but inexpensive necklace. Morton had returned them all, saying his grave "Sorry." A really superb pair of ruby cuff links, worth easily $2000, had never been recovered. Some stupid salesclerk had left them outside the case when showing them, and when he remembered them, found they had vanished. Come to think of it, Lettie had not been there that day, or had she? They could only discharge the clerk.

By the time they came within my scope of interest, Miss Lettie was unable to journey forth in search of booty. A stroke had put her in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. The use of her arms was limited too—only sufficient for manipulating her chair about the carpetless rooms of their house. This was a blessing in disguise to Mr. Morton, for he, poor fellow, was diminished too. Nearly 70 and arthritic, he had to walk with his father's cane and would have been unable to follow Miss Lettie.

He went once a day to stores and to the post office, but she almost never appeared in public. Occasionally he wheeled her out in her chair to some affair such as the Christmas church party. She would sit in her chair at the end of their family pew, staring straight ahead. Did she enjoy the songs? Did she respond to the play? It was hard to say. Her stroke had left her face almost expressionless. She spoke rarely and with such labor that people told her, not asked her, things: "You look mighty spry, Miss Lettie"; "Bet you think it's cold enough"; "I want you to have a piece of my cake." One thing had remained intact, her appetite. She would accept and munch anything handed her with unlovely contortions of her face. She bore little resemblance to the pictures in the albums except her nose and her thinness. Her teeth at last fitted inside her lips except that sometimes the top ones slipped down a bit.

Now and then on a fine day Mr. Morton rolled her out to the square across from the post office to sit for a while under the trees. He smiled a little and said it was the crippled walking the crippled, but it turned out just right. She would sit there while he did his errands and people passing would tell her what a fine day it was. Mr. Morton would return and put his packages on her lap and trundle her home.

I was fascinated by them. They held an appeal for me that no one else in town had. I think it might have been the result of my receiving several books at Christmas involving a girl detective. After

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reading them, I decided on my future career. I pored over every picture of the Jameses, listened avidly to every word about them, and haunted their house the year I was ten. If my mother wanted me to take them food, sweep the snow off their porch, or just go see if they needed anything, she did not have to ask me twice. My best friend, Mally Thurman, called me a "poop" and threatened to drop me. I had lost interest in jack rocks, in jumping rope, and in movie stars.

The room where they stayed in the cold months was fetid in spite of frequent turnings-out by neighbor women. When I ran in on one pretext or another, Mr. Morton spoke solemnly about health and weather and left for a turn outside, perhaps to bring in one or two sticks of stove wood while supporting himself with his cane.

Miss Lettie and I would be left together. Once or twice she had looked at me sidelong, drawn back her lips, let her top teeth slide down over her lower ones, clicked them back in place, and grinned. Mostly she sat silent making no effort to entertain. Yet I returned day after day. My dearest fantasy was that she would "take" something and that I would see her in the act. How she was supposed to accomplish this or from whom, I had not thought to wonder. Once she had poked a gnarled finger at my locket that I had got with Arbuckle coffee coupons and said "Prrrry." It was my prize possession and I did not wear it there again.

In warm weather it was easy to check on them. When the window of their sitting room was up, I could sit directly under it because no neighbor's house overlooked that side of their house. I would sit there by the hour, concealed by a giant snowball bush, sit there quite happily and quite fruitfully. They would be listening to a little radio on the table between them. Occasionally I would rise and take a quick peek, for I knew their chairs faced the other way, toward the stove. They would be sitting there, the radio playing softly, reading a magazine or dozing. If they sat on the porch, I openly took a seat on the steps, content to be ignored or with an infrequent word from Mr. Morton.

It was on a summer's Sunday that he got the telephone call. I had come to bring them Sunday dinner. At least one neighbor did this every week, often several. Food was the one thing we had to give. My mother had sent a whole bread pan filled with portions of our bountiful mid-day meal. Miss Lettie was gnawing a chicken leg under my intent gaze when the phone rang. Mr. Morton, holding onto various chairs, groped his way to the one by the phone, lowered

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himself into it, and picked up the receiver. I made no pretense of not listening.

"Yes, of course it's me, Tucker. About the same, and you? How's Bessie? . . . Thought I made it plain in my letter—"

During this time Miss Lettie paused in her chewing. Reaching out, she tugged at my sleeve. Slowly she winked her eye at me, dropped her top teeth, clicked them back in place, and grinned. I had to laugh. Mr. Morton looked over his shoulder and frowned.

"Can't talk about it now . . . a neighbor's child. You'll have to come and see it . . . Call me tomorrow same time. Yes, 'bye."

I knew he had a brother who visited rarely and whom the neighbors accused of neglect—"Leaving Lettie on Poor Morton." It was to be expected, they sighed, since Bessie was high-toned. Thinking back, I thought I could remember seeing him once, a tall thin old gentleman who looked like Mr. Morton except his face was smoother and he walked briskly. He had driven up in a small Ford and disappeared into his brother's house with no more than a nod to a passing neighbor. This, of course, was further evidence of how he had "changed."

Right away I was riveted. Here was something different. I rejoiced that school was out so I could monitor them more thoroughly. I tried to interest Mally in forming a team of girl detectives, but she said I was wacky. I'd never catch her sitting around in dumb old vines getting bit by chiggers. The next day, after the skimpiest lunch my mother would allow, I escaped from the table and took up my post beneath the Jameses' window. Even so, I was too late for all but the last words: "You'll see it Sunday . . . yes . . . well, 'bye."

I lived with excitement the next few days. What was *it?* Bursting with the need to talk, I approached Mally to whom I was "not speaking." "What can *it* be?" I implored her. "Who cares?" she answered heartlessly. I had worries by the dozen: suppose there should be a houseful of neighbors bringing food? Suppose they lingered and talked so long that Mr. Tucker left without satisfying my curiosity? Suppose they talked in another room away from my convenient window?

Everything worked in my favor. We had a boiled dinner, string beans cooked with ham hock, and new potatoes. My mother filled an ample bowl including a piece of the gelatinous fat that was an especial favorite of Miss Lettie's. Mr. Tucker came while she was eating it. Mr. Morton struggled with pathetic haste to open the door, taking his brother's straw hat and awkwardly stretching to hang

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it on the hall rack. He took Mr. Tucker's arm and guided him into the room.

"Here's Tucker, Lettie. He's come good and early. Sit right here in this chair, Tucker, and tell us about your trip. How's Bessie? You must have left early."

Mr. Tucker glanced around briefly—sourly, I thought. His nose wrinkled and he looked toward the window as if surprised to see it open. So far he had said nothing. But Mr. Morton had given him a cue. Tucker said, "Left home early and have to leave here early. I don't drive in the dark any more."

"Oh, I understand that, Tucker, most sensible. So many accidents at night. I don't blame you for wanting to leave early. Here, let me get a plate and give you some of these—er—beans, I believe. This neighbor cooks good beans."

Miss Lettie's eyes had brightened and her mouth had moved as if preliminary to a greeting. Mr. Tucker glanced distastefully in her direction and nodded. Now he cut in, "Never mind about that, Morton. I had a bite on the way. Rather get our business tended to." He looked significantly toward me.

I stood up and said, "I've got to go. Just let me empty the rest of this so I can take mama's bowl." Mr. Morton grabbed the bowl and with his turtle's pace headed for the kitchen and I don't know whether Mr. Tucker or I waited with greater impatience for his return. Mr. Tucker made no conversation but tapped with long bony fingers on his chair arm. He went to the window, and to my satisfaction, raised it higher. I heard the water running in the kitchen while Mr. Morton washed mother's bowl. Why hadn't I told him I'd get it tomorrow?

When I had it at last, I left, closing the door hard in a burlesque of parting, hurried to conceal myself under the window, and heard ". . . the big mystery?" from Mr. Tucker.

"Tucker, you know how Lettie and I are. It's hard to say which of us will go first."

"Morton, I didn't drive way over here today to listen to morbid talk. For all anybody knows you could live to be a hundred. Has the doctor been scaring you?"

"No, but we've got to think about these things. The winters are hard on me. I might get down. Lettie just sits there with nothing to bother her. *She* might live to be a hundred. If something happened to me, God forbid, who'd wait on her? You know Bessie wouldn't have her."

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"I've already told you my opinion. You can't tell me she knows Wednesday from July. Over and over I've begged you to put her in a home and *you* could come to us."

"No, Tucker. Just *no*. What time I've got, long or short, I'm going to stay here. It's little enough she's ever had and I'm not going to desert her now."

"All right. All right. I think I've heard all this before. Just what *do* you want with me? What about these mysterious hints in your letter? Why couldn't you just say everything in plain English instead of having me drive all to hell and back?"

"All these years, Tucker, I've been putting away a few things for Lettie. I've always known somebody would have to watch over her. So far it's been me. I'm not blaming anybody. Things just worked out that way. What I want you to do is to promise to use what I've got here for her benefit. I can't put it in a will—you'll understand. You can take a share for your trouble but use the rest to see that she's comfortable somewhere—a good boardinghouse maybe, with nice people. She won't bother a soul. Some place with good food and somebody to treat her decent and not holler at her or press her."

"Well, all right—say I promise—what is it you've got?"

There was a brief silence, then a clinking sound, and then an exclamation. Uncontrollably I rose to my knees to peer through the window, although I don't believe they would have noticed if I'd stood up straight. I can't remember what I felt except for a coldness. Mr. Tucker stood as if cast in metal.

Mr. Morton was supporting himself against the table because he had removed the tip of his cane and was using the blade of his pocketknife to pry out its contents. First he poked out a wad of bills and then shook out a cascade of sparkling objects that left dancing prisms on the wall. He put them on the table, explaining, "I can't sell them here. You understand. You must dispose of them where you live. They must be worth thousands—enough to keep Lettie."

If Mr. Tucker was immobile, Miss Lettie made up for him. She grasped the arms of her chair, jerked herself upright, and threw herself across the table, her talon hands clutching the treasure, squawking, "My . . . my . . . my!"

Mr. Morton put his hands on her shoulder and tried to ease her back into her chair. Mr. Tucker took up the cane and began to beat at her hands. Long after her hands straightened out and her head dropped down over the table he kept hammering them.

As soon as I could get my legs straight under myself, I fled home.

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Sobbing and hiccoughing, I could only tell my mother that Miss Lettie needed help. Later I tried to tell her everything. "There, darling, you are all upset. Poor Miss Lettie had another stroke and died. I know you feel bad. You were so good to her. But you mustn't say things that will be misunderstood. You are a little girl and I understand how you feel, but others won't."

"But he *hit* her. Mr. Tucker hit her with the cane."

"Were you in there?"

"No, ma'am. I was looking through the window," I admitted unwillingly, "but he hit her. Honestly, he did!"

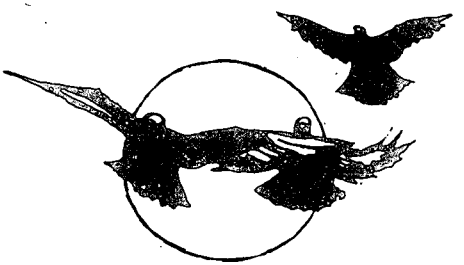
"You just saw him trying to help her after she fell."

"No, he took the cane and—"

"He picked the cane up after Mr. Morton dropped it in his shock. Now you must never say anything like that again. Child, look at me. Do you understand me?"

I was quiet at last. It was a comfort, really.

Down there behind the porch vines and around the stoves they still tell the story ". . . had a second stroke. Morton and Tucker had stepped in the kitchen to get Tucker a snack. They heard her fall out of her chair. She tried to break her fall with her hands and broke all her fingers—oh, God! . . . poor things . . . not a penny saved, only a little insurance to put Poor Lettie away. Poor Morton never was himself again . . . wouldn't even talk . . . in a home now . . . that Tucker . . . no family feeling . . . never went to see Poor Morton, not once . . . not even after he got that fancy big car, they tell me."



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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

**JOHN F. SUTER**

*In literature there is that quality called "the spirit of the place"—in the work of such American masters as Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Steinbeck, Faulkner. But there is another quality that can be called "the spirit of the people"—of the characters. This new Uncle Abner story gives us Squire Randolph, the Justice of the Peace in the Virginia of the Jeffersonian era, and Uncle Abner himself, the servant of the Lord and His hand of Justice—both as vividly evoked as if they came from the pages of Melville Davisson Post's own book . . .*

# THE DESECRATION OF THE TEMPLE

***by JOHN F. SUTER***

Many men aspire to build temples. Some do it to the glory of God, some to the glory of themselves. Others do it out of a compulsion which may spring from an inspired talent, yet intending the product to be only an expression of that talent.

This had happened in Virginia, but those of us who lived west of the great mountains had almost forgotten it. Even Squire Randolph had permitted this to happen, but he was busier than most men.

On a day in late spring, my uncle Abner and I had paused to talk to Randolph as he was preparing to go into the courthouse. The conversation was of no importance, but its interruption was.

"Gentlemen."

We looked around. The man who addressed us was sitting on a fine bay mare. He held her in check easily; one could see that she was in complete accord with her master.

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Randolph answered him. "Yes?"

"Could one of you direct me to the bank? Or is there a bank?"

Randolph's florid face reddened even more. "Sir, I regret to say that there is no longer a bank here. There was, but it has been closed for several years."

The horseman was a tall, thin man. He had a long nose in a long face. His mouth was small, but it was stretched in a smile.

"Are you in need of money?" my uncle asked.

The stranger shook his head. "No. I have sufficient." He glanced from one of us to another. "If there is no bank, could I find a representative of the law in here?"

He indicated the courthouse with a long, white hand.

"I represent the law," Randolph replied. "I am a Justice of the Peace. Or would you prefer the sheriff?"

The stranger dismounted, but stood beside his horse. Randolph stepped closer, sensing that a private discussion was wanted. At the last second, he motioned for Uncle Abner to join them.

Randolph introduced them. The stranger announced himself as Marcus Thorn, of Charlottesville, across the mountains.

"What can I do for you that a bank could do?" Randolph asked.

Thorn tapped his saddlebags.

"If you have a safe, you can keep some money for me. If you'd be so kind."

Randolph looked Thorn up and down. His clothing was somewhat dusty from riding, but it was a neat, dark gray, and of good cloth.

"My safe is in my office, at my house. We had better go there." He turned to Abner. "Could you and Martin come to witness that I give Thorn a receipt?"

We assembled finally around a large oak table in Randolph's office, which had not yet been moved from his house to the courthouse. In front of Thorn were two leather bags, not overly large, their thongs drawn tight and knotted. Thorn set to work opening them, talking as his fingers pried at the thongs.

"There should be one hundred double eagles and five single eagles here, Squire Randolph. However, it would be wise if one of you were to count them before you accept them."

When he had the bags opened, he spread a large handkerchief on the table and carefully stacked gold coins on it.

Randolph waved a fleshy hand. "Abner, would you count them?"

Uncle Abner moved into the seat which Thorn gave up and began to count silently. He set the five single eagles apart, then stacked

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the rest in piles of ten. Finally he lifted the bags, weighed each in a callused palm, and looked inside.

He handed me the two bags. "Here, Martin. Even when Rufus sent you with the cattle money years ago, you had no chance to see so many gold coins or the bags in which they are sometimes carried." Because I had sometimes seen him with a single or double eagle, he did not offer me any coins.

I looked into the bags. "I would almost fancy that the gold had left a gleam the way a buttercup does when I hold it under my chin," I said, joking.

"No," said Abner, "the coins are all there on the table. The count is as Thorn says."

He moved back and let the man from Charlottesville return the coins to the bags. Randolph busied himself with a receipt. It was not necessary that there be witnesses, but he had Abner attest to it anyway. A sum of $2,050 in gold was now in Randolph's keeping.

When Randolph finished locking the bags away, Thorn accepted his receipt and stretched his small mouth in a smile again.

"Now, Squire, you are due an explanation."

Randolph demurred. "No, sir. None is needed."

Thorn reached inside his coat and withdrew a notecase. His probing fingers felt inside it and withdrew an oblong slip.

"No, that is not it." He replaced the slip, felt again, and took out another. He handed it to Randolph.

Randolph's eyes widened as he saw it. " 'Jefferson Lottery! State of Virginia!' " He read on, and some of the astonishment faded. "Oh, I see. The date is April, 1826."

"While Mr. Jefferson was still alive," Thorn said softly. "Have you heard of this?"

"I thought it might be a repetition," said Randolph, explaining himself. "Yes, I have indeed heard of it. Even though he was an old rival of Mr. Jefferson's, John Randolph bought $500 worth of tickets in this very lottery." His face saddened as he remembered. "As Mr. Jefferson's life drew to a close, he found that his debts were more than $100,000—a fortune. He had no way to raise such a sum. Finally, he proposed to the legislature that all his land except Monticello be awarded to winners of a lottery."

He shook his head. "It is more than twenty-five years ago, but I can still hear Adam Bird." He turned to Thorn. "That is one of our traveling preachers. When he heard of this, Bird denounced it as immoral."

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"More than that—Mr. Jefferson, himself, knew that it would be called immoral," Thorn remarked.

"Abner, would you call it so?" Randolph asked.

My uncle must have surprised him. "Why, it is a thing of chance. That is no more and no less what confronts me whenever I raise a calf to a full-grown animal to send to Baltimore. Every pig of mine which becomes a hog for the butcher faces the same thing."

Randolph was indeed taken aback. "Have you gone back on your faith, then?"

"No," said Abner. "I believe the chance was set to test a man's submission to his Master's will."

Thorn was studying Abner. "Mr. Jefferson defended the morality of his lottery in terms not unlike yours."

Abner glanced first at him, then at Randolph. "I would hear the rest of it."

Randolph resumed, "The legislature passed the lottery. You will have guessed that. It fell far short of the sum which was needed. Many of Mr. Jefferson's friends then tried to subscribe contributions. Not enough money was raised even then. At last, Mr. Jefferson died only a few months after he conceived his plan. In the end, all his holdings had to be sold to pay his debts."

A sadness came across my uncle's face. "I seem to hear Adam Bird's voice. And I need not tell you what it says."

Thorn cleared his throat. He was no longer smiling. "Squire Randolph did not come to the end of the story, perhaps because he does not know it."

"What?" cried Randolph. "Is there more? Has someone come forward demanding more money after all these years?"

"No," replied Thorn. "Heaven be thanked. It is only that Monticello is falling into neglect. I, and others like me, are out to do what we can to halt that."

"I was unaware," said Randolph.

"You are part of an organization to raise funds, then," Abner said to Thorn.

"Yes, we hope to ask every citizen to give what he can, however small or however great. We intend to give this to the present owner of the property."

"The restoration of the temple," Abner said.

Thorn raised his eyebrows. "Which restoration?"

"It is like the action of King Joash," Abner replied. "He saw that the temple was crumbling through the neglect of the priests. At his

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command, a great chest was set out, fitted so that every person could drop in an offering through a hole in the lid."

Randolph smiled. "I saw no chest on the back of Thorn's horse."

"The meaning is close enough," said Thorn. "I collect what I can, either as paper or as coin, then take it to the nearest bank to be converted into gold for convenience. When I have collected a sum large enough to tempt robbers, I find a place which will keep it for me."

"You should travel with a guard," Abner said. "It is a great temptation."

"I have not needed one," Thorn replied.

Randolph was about to comment, when a loud knocking was heard at the door. I heard his servant go to answer it, but he had scarcely opened it before a bellowing voice made the hall ring.

"This is Squire Randolph's, I take it. Is there a lean rascal calling himself Thorn in there? No, never mind an answer. I'll see for myself."

Randolph's man had no time to bar the way or protest. He was elbowed aside by a man I should have hated to face in a dispute. His dress was good enough, even giving evidence that it clothed a man of means. The man, himself, was another matter. Though only of little more than average height, he had immensely broad shoulders. His wide hands were muscled, and their knuckles were abundantly scarred. A shock of bristling black hair crowned a face which seemed to wear a permanent scowl. He carried a small riding whip.

He glared at Thorn. "So you are here. A good thing." He looked at Randolph and Abner in turn, then spoke to Randolph.

"You'd be the justice, I'll venture. I want that man arrested."

"On what charge?" Randolph asked.

"He's a thief. He stole money from me."

"You will swear to a charge?"

The angry man's face had been getting redder the more he talked. Randolph's own florid countenance was hardly a match for it now. "I'll swear to anything you draw up, just so I get my money back and see this thief jailed!" the stranger bellowed.

"Who makes this charge?" Randolph went on.

"I do! Write it Benjamin Gallegher, and I'll sign it, if you want me to!"

Randolph had still made no move to do anything. He was watching the accused man, who showed no sign of being disturbed.

"How much money did he steal?" Randolph asked.

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"Two bags of gold coins. One hundred double eagles and five single eagles."

Randolph continued the questioning. "What were the circumstances?"

Gallegher bristled. "What about my warrant? Will you let him sit there smirking?"

My uncle broke in. "He will not escape, Mr. Gallegher. Let Randolph finish. How did this happen?"

Gallegher looked at him in surprise. Some of the red receded from his face. Abner's sensible remarks were easily understood.

"You are quite right, sir. Very well. I own several profitable grist mills along the Monongahela, in Pennsylvania, and I have decided to invest some of my profits in beef cattle. I was on my way here with the gold I have mentioned. I stopped for the night at an inn in Fairmont.

"There was only one other guest there—that scoundrel who calls himself Thorn. He gave me a plausible enough tale of seeking money to restore Mr. Jefferson's mansion. I said that I would give him some assistance in the morning—and so I intended. However, we spent some time drinking together before retiring. I told him the purpose of my journey, and he must have guessed that I was worth robbing. He pressed more liquor on me than I should have taken. I slept all too soundly. When I awoke, the thief had gone. So had my money."

The red began to reappear in Gallegher's face.

"But I have tracked him here, and I'll have my money back and the wretch in jail!"

He pointed at Thorn with the butt of his riding whip.

There was silence for a moment. Randolph glanced in turn from accuser to accused. He was clearly considering the charge which had been made. He was obviously also weighing the boldness of a thief who had given him his plunder to keep, if, indeed, it were plunder.

"Well, Thorn," he said finally, "what have you to say before I draw up this warrant?"

"Why, I must say that this is the most brazen scoundrel I have ever encountered," Thorn replied. "If one of us has thievery in his heart, it is he, not I."

Gallegher raised his whip hand. "I'll flog you to your knees if you say that lie again!"

"You will do no such thing," my uncle said in a firm voice. "We must hear what he says, then it will be up to Randolph to act. You are not the law here."

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Randolph turned to Thorn. "Go on. I must warn you—and you, too, Gallegher—moderate your language."

Thorn's tone was dry. "I can only speak the truth. We did meet at the inn, as he said. However, he made no mention of cattle buying. We did drink through the evening, but I did so only in moderation. I had told him of my mission. As we drank, I could see that he supposed that I might have money. That is why I controlled my drinking and let him outpace me. That is why I left very early and rode here. That is why I turned the money over to you for safekeeping."

He paused. "But I did not foresee being branded a thief. I never conceived of a rogue who would publicly demand that another man's gold be handed over to him on his unsupported word."

"Rogue, am I?" shouted Gallegher. "I have papers to prove that I am who I say I am!"

"I have the same," Thorn answered.

"Forgeries!" cried the angry man.

"Surely more genuine than yours," Thorn replied.

Randolph smote his desk and stood up. "I should have both of you jailed. Thorn, as you have pointed out, such brazenness as you claim for Gallegher would be incredible. Gallegher, you bring charges against Thorn without support. One story is the mirror of the other. If you were both jailed until one confesses, it would solve this."

He mopped away some sweat with a linen handkerchief.

"If only I were Justice Marshall, instead of a Justice of the Peace!"

My uncle's deep voice cut into the tension of the moment.

"Gallegher."

The burly man turned in his direction, startled. "Yes?"

"Describe the gold."

Puzzlement replaced the man's scowl.

"I have already done that. It is in the form of one hundred double eagles and five single eagles."

"And that is all?"

Gallegher twisted his head as though shaking something away. "That is all I can say. Nothing more."

Abner's gaze was intent. "Then how could you identify it?"

Gallegher shrugged. "How would you? Money is money. I told you the amount."

Abner nodded. "That is true. Thorn knows that, too." He turned to the Charlottesville man. "Thorn, can you do better?"

The tall man seemed to be thinking. "No, I cannot."

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Abner's expression was unreadable. "I might have supposed that the owner would have marked the coins."

"The banks have no love for that," Thorn remarked.

"They might not love it," Abner retorted, "but they will accept it if the disfiguring is not too great."

He turned to Randolph. "Randolph, open the safe and let me examine the gold."

Randolph did so, not questioning. I knew he supposed that Abner had discerned some mark on the coins. I thought he would be disappointed. I had seen no mark.

Once again, Abner carefully removed the coins from the sacks. This time, he studied each one as he made the stacks.

When he was finished, he began to return the gold to the bags.

"Randolph," he said, "the coins are unmarked. As Gallegher has said, money is money. For a man to claim it without proof does not make him its owner."

Thorn smiled. "But I have Squire Randolph's receipt."

Randolph answered him quickly. "The receipt says that I accepted this from you. It does not identify you as the owner."

Gallegher's scowl was back. "Do I understand that you will give this to neither one of us?"

"Not at this time," said Randolph.

Gallegher barely contained his rage. "A clever scheme, I must say! You have all connived with this thief. You think that I will give up and go away. When I'm gone, my gold will be divided among you!"

"By no means," said Abner. "If the gold is yours, you will get it."

"I'm not so sure," Gallegher went on. "You had a thief for a sheriff, once, I'm told. How do I know I can trust you?"

"The man you mention was punished," Randolph said. "We are the ones who exposed him."

Thorn maintained his air of confidence. "Squire Randolph," he said, "I still wish you to keep my gold. I can go ahead with my work without it."

Gallegher's jaw was working, but he said nothing.

Uncle Abner stood up. "Randolph, I believe there is a way to find an answer, if we think about it. Let them both go away and return tomorrow morning at nine."

Both claimants to the money agreed to this, Thorn readily, Gallegher reluctantly. It seemed, then, that the day's dispute had ended.

Yet Abner had not finished. He had Randolph call for hot sealing

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wax. When it was brought, he sealed the drawstrings of each bag. He then had Gallegher mark the wax of one bag as he chose, and Thorn do the same with the other.

This action was neither approved nor disapproved by Thorn. On the other hand, Gallegher seemed satisfied for the first time since he had appeared.

I wondered, as Gallegher took his leave, how he would have reacted if he had seen what I had seen when Abner counted the money.

My uncle had slipped one of the double eagles from the others. It was now in his pocket.

Promptly at nine the next morning, we were all in Randolph's office again, all five seated this time.

There was no question who would speak first. Gallegher seized the initiative.

"Well! We are to hear a verdict, are we? There is only one right one. Let's hear it."

Randolph looked at Abner.

"The verdict will be given," my uncle said. "First you, Gallegher, and you, Thorn, must examine the bags."

The two bags of coins had been removed from Randolph's safe and placed on the large, oak office table. At Abner's instigation, both disputants examined the seals and agreed that no tampering had occurred. On further urging, Gallegher and Thorn each broke the seal on a bag and loosed the drawn strings.

"Before the money is awarded," said Abner, "there is a requirement."

He laid an ordinary small kitchen knife on the table.

"Whoever gets this money must agree to sit here and put his mark on every coin. Not just a scratch. A deep cut. Will you do that, Gallegher?"

The choleric man's scowl was plain again.

"Why should I? The money's mine."

"There are several reasons," Abner said. "I can give you one: so that, if you make this charge again, you can prove ownership."

Gallegher's behavior changed abruptly. He hesitated, then clenched his jaw. Finally he arose and went to the window. After staring out for several minutes, he spoke.

"I see there is no justice here. The cleverest scoundrels I have ever met. You will let me mark the gold, then give it to me. After I leave, you will have me followed. When I spend some of the money, you will arrest me. The marked money will be evidence that I am

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supposed to be a thief. The mark will be his, not mine, you will say."

Without turning to face us, he began to walk away. "A costly lesson, but one I'll never forget. Keep the cursed gold, if you want it so badly."

He slammed the door as he left.

Randolph spoke at last. "What do you think, Abner?"

My uncle made no reply. He was looking at the bags of money.

Thorn cleared his throat. "It is quite plain. He is a liar and a thief. The money is mine, as I have said. It can be returned to the safe."

"You have spoken the truth in all those things," said Abner. "Yet you still have not agreed to my requirement."

Thorn laughed. "There is no need to mark it. You just said that the money is mine."

"I did," said Abner.

"And you marked Gallegher as a thief and a liar."

"I did. I see him as even more than that."

"And you did not ask Squire Randolph to have him arrested?"

"On what charge? He stole nothing. He took nothing from anyone."

Thorn's calm was beginning to desert him.

"He swore falsely against me. Is that not enough?"

Abner did not answer this, as he had avoided answering Randolph earlier.

"Randolph," he said, "have you ever noticed that the truth is often made up as much from things unsaid as from things which are spoken?"

"I have," Randolph replied slowly, "but I could not give you an example."

"I can," said Abner. "Yesterday we heard two men claiming the ownership of these bags of coins. Yet neither offered to get testimony from the source of those coins as to his right to claim it."

Thorn reddened for the first time. "I knew that I was in the right. I saw no need to do it. I knew that you would expose that scoundrel for what he was."

"Why," said Abner, "I have not done that yet."

"But you have!" Thorn exclaimed. "He has already exposed himself! More, he made it clear that the money is mine."

"Yes," said Abner, "and that is what exposes him for what he is."

"I fail to understand you," said Thorn.

Abner stared at him. "You do? For the last time, will you mark the coins?"

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"I will not do an act so unnecessary."

"Then," said Abner, "I will name Gallegher. He is your accomplice."

Thorn's eyebrows rose in amazement. "Accomplice? Did I help him plan to steal from me? Or did he help me plan to steal from him?"

"Neither of those. You are both liars and thieves of a sort, and you are attempting a double deception. That scheme has just broken down."

Thorn laughed without amusement. "I have heard that those who live in the hills are suspicious to the point of madness. I had not believed it until now. What sort of deception do you claim?"

"You are right," said Abner. "Our people are suspicious. They would be slow to part with money, even to restore Jefferson's mansion. They would have to feel sure of the man who approached them. What better way than to have him cleared of the accusation of theft? To have him cleared by reputable men?"

"The charge was false, that is plain," Thorn replied, "but I did not raise it. I have no control over rascals. That should not reflect on the honesty of my mission."

"It does cast a shadow on the honesty of your mission when it is coupled with the other part of your deception," my uncle said in a deep voice. "I say that you plan to take falsely solicited money with one hand and pass falsely made money with the other."

Thorn reached for the bags of coins. "It seems that I cannot meet a stranger without becoming the target of lies. I had better take my money and leave."

"You identify it as your money, then?" said Abner. "Good. But leave you may not, nor will the money."

Abner turned to me.

"Martin," he said, "yesterday you fancied you saw the gleam of gold in the empty bags. I was amused, but I thought more of it later. I have heard in Baltimore that one of the devices of counterfeiters is to place gold coins into bags and shake them. This produces a small quantity of gold dust.

"A mold of a coin is made, then molten metal of a baser nature is used to make new coins in the mold. While these are still hot, they are coated lightly with the gold dust and heated enough to bond the metals. In this way, a rogue can expand his fortune."

He stopped and fixed Thorn with an unwavering stare.

"Thorn, I charge that your mission is as false as these coins. You intend only to collect money to exchange it for gold. The gold is

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intended both to enrich you directly and to supply dust for your counterfeits."

The thin man's lips curled. "All of this from a youth's wild fantasies!"

"No," replied Abner. "You refused to mark the coins. You knew that a cut would expose the base metal. I borrowed one of your coins and found it was so."

He pulled a yellow double eagle from his pocket and placed it before us. As Randolph picked up the coin, Abner drew another from one of the bags and cut the surface with the knife. He handed the second coin to Randolph.

"Clearly it is as you say," exclaimed Randolph. "I must draw up charges against this rascal at once."

He looked up. "Abner, you have shown me the true decision in this affair."

"But I committed an error," my uncle answered.

"I refuse to believe it," said Randolph.

Abner stood up, looking not at Randolph, but at Thorn. "Just the same, I did err. I compared this creature to King Joash, or to one of his followers. That was my mistake. They were restorers of the temple.

"Much later in Jerusalem, our Lord drove out the desecrators of the temple. Chief among them were the moneychangers."

"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### *MUDDLED MUSE*

*by LOLA STRONG JANES*

I rise from my pillow, intense,
And scribble some words of suspense.
But the lines that I write
In the still of the night
A few hours hence make no sense!

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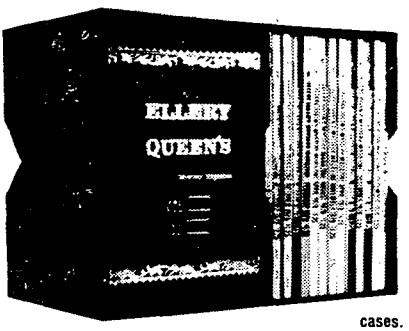


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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

# CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

This is, I regret to say, my last column for *EQMM,* so I'll jump around with lots of miscellaneous material in order to mention as much as possible.

It was exciting to learn that the protagonist in Brian Garfield's controversial bestseller, *The Paladin,* Winston Churchill's personal hit-man, named Christopher Creighton in the novel (code name Christopher Robin) was really named Craig Hamilton. The disappointment came when it was further learned that that name, too, was an alias. His true identity remains a well guarded secret.

And speaking of true identities, we will respect the privacy of Trevanian but will go so far as to say that his initials are R.W. and that he teaches at a Pennsylvania university. He has written espionage thrillers under no other pseudonyms.

An interesting, if peripheral, publication is *Journal Fantome,* which is switching from a quarterly to an annual this year, with hopes of going back to a four-per-year schedule if there is sufficient interest. It is accurately billed as "A Review of the Macabre in the Arts and Letters" and is a well designed periodical issued by Fantome Press, 720 North Park Ave., Warren, OH 44483. A subscription is $2.00 per year.

One of the most ambitious and prestigious projects in the book-publishing world is the newly started *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* This extraordinary project is planned to include approximately 100 volumes, each more than a quarter of a million words, with illustrations and bibliographies, making it, in all likelihood, the preeminent literary reference work in the United States. What helps make it significant for many of us is that at least four of the volumes will be devoted entirely to authors of mystery and detective fiction—the most comprehensive attention ever devoted to the genre and its practitioners. The first four volumes in the series have been published, but the first of the mystery volumes is still two years away. A Bruccoli Clark Book, in association with Gale Research Company, the project editor is Richard Layman (author of the recently published Dashiell Hammett bibliography and the forthcoming Hammett biography).

Did you know that The Saint Club exists and, indeed, flourishes? The



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president is Simon Templar, the vice-president is Leslie Charteris, the patron saint is Lord George-Brown, and the saint-in-chief is Iain Ogilvy. A rule book lists an unusual set of bylaws. For example, Rule No. 5: "Prospective Members may propose themselves, second themselves, and, if so inclined, shoot themselves." Rule No. 9: "Any meeting place where two or more Saints are gathered together shall be known as a Heaven. If they start talking politics it will probably look more like Hell. In any case, it will probably be called a Bar." While it's all grand fun, the proceeds are donated to the Arbour Youth Centre in London, providing a worthwhile function into the bargain. Annual dues are one pound sterling and further information may be had from the honourable secretary, Norman Turner, Shandy Street, Stepney, London E.1, England. With a new television series about The Saint, and Charter books committed to reprinting virtually every Saint book, there is an evident boom in the derring-do of the famous adventurer. Heavenly!

Richard Levinson and William Link, creators of *Columbo* and the team responsible for more than a dozen of the most outstanding mystery series on television in the past decade, have signed a contract with St. Martin's Press for a book about all their adventures in the mysterious world of television. What was it really like behind the scenes of the Ellery Queen series? What was it like to work with Peter Falk? All the answers should be found in this volume.

An interesting critical work is David Geherin's *Sons of Sam Spade* (Ungar, $10.95), which is devoted to a study of the American private eye as seen in the works of Robert B. Parker (Spenser), Roger L. Simon (Moses Wine), and Andrew Bergman (Jack LeVine). It is distressing, however, to see such emphasis placed on three characters, only one of whom (Spenser) is in the same literary league as Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Lew Archer. To totally ignore such writers as Bill Pronzini, Joe Gores, Thomas Chastain, and Peter Israel, among others, in favor of the three subjects of the book suggests a selection made either arbitrarily or ignorantly. The perceptions displayed in this readable account suggest the former.

Whatever else you read this year, be sure not to miss Dick Francis' *Whip Hand,* Robert B. Parker's *The Search for Rachel Wallace,* Lawrence Block's *The Burglar Who Liked To Quote Kipling,* Donald E. Westlake's *Castle in the Air,* William Kienzle's *Death Wears a Red Hat,* and *The Floating Admiral* (Charter, $2.50), written by Certain Members of the Detection Club—a round-robbin novel with chapters by Sayers, Christie, Chesterton, Berkeley, and the other great British names of the 1920s.

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"Q"



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# BLOODY VISIONS

**by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

The annual Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Awards to outstanding mystery motion pictures and television programs are a good indication of the year's gilt-edged offerings in the genre, a roll call of our very best.

Selecting the top movie must have been difficult, as the three nominations all had strong points in their favor. *The Great Train Robbery,* a screenplay by Michael Crichton drawn from his own novel, was a boisterous, supposedly true account of the world's first railway heist—of a British train carrying gold for Crimean War paychecks. *Murder by Decree* was also in period: the most probing and factual of all film versions of Jack the Ripper's bloody career, with an investigative Sherlock Holmes mixed into the historical account and ultimately ending his crimes. The talky though interesting script, full of references to cabals and royal involvements, was by John Hopkins. The Ripper is also the adversary in *Time After Time,* catapulted into modern San Francisco thanks to H. G. Wells' time machine, with the inventor in furious pursuit—a joyous fantasy adventure mystery by Nicholas Meyer. All three films dip into the past and into real crimes, curiously enough, but it is *The Great Train Robbery* which pulls into first place—aided, no doubt, by its engaging portrait of a larger-than-life master scam-artist (played by Sean Connery).

The nominations for the best television program in a series were all of excellent quality as well. "A Hollywood Whodunit," written by Michele Gallery for the *Lou Grant* show, had Grant's newspaper investigate a long-ago movie-colony murder—a teleplay deliberately reaching for a Chandleresque mood. "Only the Pretty Girls Die," the premiere episode of the *Eischied* series about a New York police chief, presented a close fictional parallel to the tracking down of the *"Son of Sam"* murderer, with dogged detective work realistically portrayed. The script was by Mark Rodgers. A Stephen J. Cannell episode for *Stone* was also nominated, in which novelist-policeman Stone (whose character is very reminiscent of Joseph Wambaugh) investigates some underworld deaths to discover that a group of fellow cops, including his own best friend, may have become self-appointed mob executioners. But the Edgar winner for this category was the entry called "Skin" in *Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected,* dramatized by Dahl and Robin Chapman, about why a vagrant with a famous tattoo on his back should view with suspicion all generous offers to place himself on display. *Unexpected* is a welcome return to television's mystery-anthology concept.

Entries for the best feature film made for television: *Murder by Natural Causes,* written by Richard Levinson and William Link, in which a famous mentalist's wife attempts to bring him to death—a plot as twisted



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as Uri Geller's spoon. *Nero Wolfe,* an elaborate television adaptation by Frank Gilroy of Rex Stout's *The Doorbell Rang.* Paul Monash's shreiky screenplay of *Salem's Lot,* from the Stephen King bestseller about New England vampires. (Regrettably, *The Golden Gate Murders,* an interesting teleplay about a tough cop and a fragile nun who begin a nervous romance while investigating supposed suicides off the San Francisco bridge, appears not to have been nominated.) It goes without saying that the protean Levinson and Link, whose contribution to the television mystery has been enormous, walked away with the Edgar this year as well—for last year they received special Edgars for the creation of TV series as diverse as *Columbo* and *Ellery Queen.*

Charmingly, a special Raven award was given the "Muppet Murders" episode of *The Muppet Show,* in which Liza Minnelli—playing a moll named O'Shaughnessy and wearing a costume the exact replica of Claire Trevor's in *Murder My Sweet*—consults with trenchcoated detective Kermit the Frog about the deaths surrounding her Broadway opening. Knives fly, puppets die, Kermit nearly croaks. Can the killer be understudy Miss Piggy, out to hog the spotlight? No, she's merely a bacon-wrapped red herring. The real murderer is—But catch this joyful, affectionate sendup of private-eye melodramas on reruns for yourself.

The major MWA awards of the evening also reflected cinematic interests. The Grand Master Award was given to W. R. Burnett, for his "landmark works in the genre . . . the almost single-handed creator in fiction of the American gangster-crime story." This includes his work in such films as *Little Caesar, Scarface, High Sierra,* and *The Asphalt Jungle.* Artist Chester Gould was given an Edgar as his Dick Tracy began a fiftieth year of battling crime. And Ira Levin was honored for his stage success, *Deathtrap.*

As we move into the 1980s, the mystery certainly seems to be holding its own.

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# THE JURY BOX

**by JON L. BREEN**

The hard-boiled private eye seemed an endangered species in the spy-infested Sixties, but in the Seventies—with the bestsellerdom of Ross Macdonald, increased academic and critical interest in Hammett and Chandler, and the debuts of a number of new writers in the form—he (and sometimes she) staged a notable comeback. By the evidence of three of this month's new novels, the private eye is healthy and vital entering the Eighties.

*** Robert B. Parker: *Looking for Rachel Wallace,* Delacorte/Seymour Lawrence, $8.95. In a much better case than his last pair, Boston dick Spenser is hired to protect a lesbian-



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feminist author off on the book-flogging circuit, a scene depicted by Parker with a measure of satiric exaggeration. Spenser is a bit of a throwback—unlike many of his contemporary colleagues, he relishes violence, and he will prove a tonic for any reader who fears private-eye wisecracking is a lost art. The case is underplotted, but not as severely as usual.

Spenser, along with Roger L. Simon's Moses Wine and Andrew Bergman's Jack LeVine, is the subject of David Geherin's *Sons of Sam Spade* (Ungar, $9.95), an interesting new critical study of recent private-eye fiction.

*** Jonathan Valin: *The Lime Pit,* Dodd, Mead, $8.95. Cincinnati operative Harry Stoner offers a fresh voice as well as a fresh locale. Investigating the disappearance of a teenage runaway for an old man she had been living with, Stoner goes through some familiar paces but manages to sound not quite like any other fictional private eye. The second half is not up to the first—Valin overdoes the movie references, not an uncommon failing lately, and the great slow-motion cliché strikes again—but the characters and the sleazy background are beautifully done. This seems a sure candidate for the best-first-mystery Edgar.

*** Bill Pronzini: *Labyrinth,* St. Martin's, $8.95. The nameless sleuth is older than most (52), collects old pulp magazines, and has apparently survived a case of lung cancer. His latest case, set partly in San Francisco and partly in Bodega Bay (of Hitchcock's *Birds* fame), is intricately plotted, decently clued, and sensitively written. The Nameless series has become one of mystery fiction reliable products.

*** William Oscar Johnson: *The Zero Factor,* Pocket Books, $2.75. The title of this political thriller refers to the disquieting fact that the last seven Presidents elected in years ending with a zero died in office, four by assassination. A likeable, out-of-his-depth dark horse named Gus York is elected in 1980, and an expert professional assassin called Le Bombardier stalks him. Presidential security is being computerized, and some occult interest enters in as York demands the computer be programmed to predict the future. As exploitative as all this sounds, the novel has some interesting plot ideas and generates real suspense in the denouement.

*** Jeffrey Campbell: *The Homing,* Putnam, $9.95. Insurance man George Kenner goes to visit his newly married daughter in one of those Strange Villages where everything (including her) seems picture perfect and not quite right. Recalling Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* and TV's *The Prisoner,* this nightmare-conspiracy novel is neither very original nor very plausible, but it is expertly written and guaranteed to keep you reading. (The byline represents a collaboration of novelists Jeffrey Caine and Campbell Black.)

*** Noël Vreeland Carter: *This Band of Spirits,* Signet, $2.25. Set in a Cornish abbey in 1850, rich in atmosphere and apparent occult manifestations, this novel merits the term gothic more than most, but it is anything but the routine romantic-suspense job the bland cover suggests. For one thing, the heroine, a possible parricide motivated less by love



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than by hatred of an elderly aunt, is among the most atypical I've ever run across. Leisurely and sometimes florid in its period style, this is not for every taste, but it's highly recommended to the reader looking for something different in the romantic mystery.

** Dennis Smith: *Glitter and Ash*, Dutton, $9.95. The Wambaugh of the firehouse merits high marks for sincerity and authenticity in this novel of New York City fire marshalls investigating a disastrous disco blaze. But the author's social consciousness overwhelms the story, and despite some good action writing the net effect is more sermon than novel.

With his unerring craftsmanship and astonishing versatility, Stanley Ellin is the short-story writer the rest of us would like to emulate and probably never will. *The Specialty of the House and Other Stories* (Mysterious Press, $15.00; limited edition, $35.00) brings together all 35 of his stories from 1948 to 1978, including four not in any of Ellin's three previous collections. The author has also written a new Introduction. This is one of the basic books for any mystery-story library.

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"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### *GETTING HIS KICKS*

*by MARK GRENIER*

A malevolent chap named Canute
Likes to kick folks to death. (What a brute!)
Ere he slew his wife Ruth,
Who thought kicking "uncouth,"
He was cruel; now he's Ruthless to boot.

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## THE POE-TIC CORNER

# STOPPING BY WOODS

*(With apologies to Robert Frost and Edgar Allan Poe)*

*by* BETTY JOCHMANS

Whose woods these are I think I know,
His name is Edgar Allan Poe.
He will not see me stopping—yet
I feel his presence like a net.

My little car must think it queer
To stop with no State Trooper near.
The one thing I have learned too late
Is not to leave the Interstate.

My wheels won't budge, my battery's dead,
It seems I failed to use my head.
Of country roads I wasn't leery,
Now my midnight's bleak and dreary.

I'd like to give my horn a toot,
But first I'll bury all the loot
Somewhere beneath this old oak tree—
(Is that a raven watching me?)

These woods are thick and dark and deep.
Next time I will steal a jeep.
But right now I have miles to go—
A life of crime is full of woe!

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"Q"



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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

**CELIA FREMLIN**

*How did Celia Fremlin come to imagine this particular story? It would be interesting to know . . . "It's the queerest light I've ever seen, a sort of unearthly glow! . . . Get back, get back! The tentacles! . . . We must lock all the doors and windows!" . . .*

# THE THING IN THE BACK GARDEN

***by CELIA FREMLIN***

What would *you* do, friends, (and I'm addressing married men everywhere)—what would *you* do if you were roused from your marital bed at two a.m. by a phone call from a blonde, beautiful, and unhappily married neighbor, telling you that a flying saucer has just landed in her back garden, and she's frightened?

Well, go on, what *would* you do? Don't all answer at once; think about it, just as I had to think. And remember that in my case I'd just been wrenched out of my first and deepest sleep—what with the Harpers coming round to play Scrabble and staying till all hours, we hadn't gone to bed till after twelve—and so my brain was at its lowest ebb.

To clear it, I shook my head feebly from side to side. I rubbed my eyes. I switched on the bedside light and looked down at my wife Pam, still sleeping peacefully. It takes an earthquake to wake Pam once she is really off, this I know well; but then, of course, an earthquake is one thing, and the husky voice of a blonde and beautiful neighbor phoning me in the middle of the night is quite another. Still, asleep Pam was, no doubt about it at all.

And so the options were all open. I could, if I chose, shake her by

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the shoulder, pull the covers off her, and bellow into her ear, "Darling, Sheila Curtis has just phoned up to say there's a flying saucer in her garden. What had I better do?"

Well, how would *your* wife react? I can tell you straightaway how Pam would.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, John," she'd mumble irritably. "*Do* shut up and go to sleep! I *told* you not to eat all those pickled gherkins last thing at night . . ." And she'd be dead to the world again before the words were properly out of her mouth.

And so that left the second option.

"I'll be along right away," I breathed carefully into the phone; and slipping quietly out of bed, I pulled on slacks and a sweater over my pajamas. Then, shuffling my feet into the old leather slippers at my bedside, I tiptoed out of the room. Pam's relaxed and regular breathing followed me across the landing and partway down the stairs, but after that I lost it, and by the time I reached the hall I could hear absolutely nothing. The house, as I gently closed the front door behind me, seemed silent as the grave.

I was to wish later that this hackneyed little phrase hadn't slipped into my mind at that particular moment, but there you are, it did.

Outside, the moon was rising—a half moon, orangey-colored, and lying almost on its back in the low star-studded sky. Have you noticed how the moon, if it is visible at all at these strange hours of the night, always seems to be lying at some odd angle? Once, when I was quite young, I used to understand why this had to be so; and I find it touching, somehow, that it's all still going on, even though the clear explanation of it is gone from my mind forever.

All this sounds like a digression, doesn't it, a mere piece of padding; but it isn't really. The phase of the moon that night and the hour of its rising were more important than you might imagine—more important, certainly, than *I* could have imagined as I walked the few doors to Sheila's house. The neat little front gardens, so familiar by day, seemed strange to me now, suddenly pregnant with vast mysterious bushes twice their daytime size under the gray, primeval light.

And it was only now, listening to the slip-slop of my footsteps along the silent pavement, that I began actually to *think*; to ask myself what the hell I thought I was doing? Until now I'd been in that state of mild shock you experience when you are confronted with the fact that something has happened which can't have happened. Just simply can't. But it has.

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And I don't mean the flying saucer. Naturally, as a rational man, I dismissed out of hand the possibility that there might *actually* be a flying saucer in Sheila's garden. But that only left the mystery even more insoluble—more sinister, in a way, when you really came to think about it. What on earth could have got into Sheila that she'd make a crazy call like that? And at this hour of the night, too; and to *me*, of all people? What did she think she was up to? Had she, at long last, *actually* gone mad?

The thought gave me a nasty twinge of fear. Goodness knows, Sheila has complained often enough that her husband, Brian, is driving her round the bend; but lots of wives talk like that, as we all know. Often, they seem positively to enjoy their status of distinctive misery, weeping on every available shoulder, and sitting at each other's kitchen table, crying into cups of tea; and it gives one quite a jolt to realize suddenly that all these tears and dramas may sometimes actually mean something.

By this time I had reached Sheila's house, and as I stood at the gate, hesitating, I became aware of something that was really rather strange. How come that all the windows of the house were in darkness? Surely a woman as scared as Sheila had claimed to be would have switched lights on everywhere for reassurance? And why wasn't she already hurrying out to meet me—or at least calling to me from some upper window? Mad or sane, after that panicky phone call she must surely have been watching anxiously for my arrival?

Or was the whole thing a trick? A deliberate, carefully thought-out trick, for some purpose or purposes as yet undivulged? It would be false modesty on my part of the most hypocritical kind to pretend that it had not yet crossed my mind that Sheila Curtis might be in love with me. Mine was one of the shoulders she frequently wept on when Brian was up to one or another of his various misdemeanors; and you know what women are. Might she not have cooked up this whole absurd flying-saucer story simply and solely to lure me along to her place in the middle of the night, while her errant husband was away? To invite me in, and then, on the pretext of viewing the mysterious object from an upstairs back window, to get me into one of the bedrooms . . . ?

Okay, so she gets me there. But what then? How does she play the *next* scene—the scene where she has to explain, laughingly, and hoping that I will laugh too, that the whole thing has been a hoax? No wonder she's getting cold feet about it, and is in no great hurry to come down and face me!

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But wait! Perhaps I've got it all wrong. Perhaps I'm into the wrong scenario altogether. Maybe we are going to sidle hand in hand into her commonplace back garden, gray under the dying moon, while she clutches me in simulated terror.

"Look, look!" she is going to whisper hoarsely, pointing at random across the sodden oblong of suburban lawn. "You see?—that huge thing by the hedge—sort of greenish-gray where the moonlight catches it? Gosh, it must be twelve feet across at least—and that great sort of dome on top! Wait a second—your eyes aren't accustomed to the light yet. It's the queerest light I've ever seen, a sort of unearthly glow! Oh, and look now, John, just look—all those bluey lights flickering from the cabin windows! Those weren't there before, I'll swear! Oh, isn't this exciting! Let's get a bit closer."

One step, two steps across the damp grass, and then, "Watch out!" she'll shriek. "Get back, get back! The tentacles! Run, John, run! My God, they're reaching right across the lawn! Get back, get inside! We must lock all the doors and windows!"

Or something of the kind. I don't know, actually, if Sheila watches these kind of programs, but they can't be difficult to make up. And in any case there's another way she could play it—an easier way, much, much easier, now that I come to think of it. Yes, that's the one she'll choose: "John, oh John, dear, if *only* you'd arrived just two minutes earlier! It's gone! It's just absolutely gone! I saw it with my own eyes, it rose straight off the lawn in a vertical takeoff (or wouldn't Sheila know about vertical takeoffs?) and then it suddenly changed direction, almost at a right angle, and whooshed off northward (or southward, or whatever) at a fantastic speed, and was out of sight in seconds! Come, I'll show you where the grass is all flattened out, and stones have been knocked from the rockery."

And there, in the last of the goblin light, we'd lean down, heads together, pretending to examine these nonsensical "traces" of the thing.

Smiling to myself, curious to guess what innocent irregularities of turf or flowerbed she was going to conjure up as evidence, I slipped round the side of the house, down the narrow cement-paved passageway where the dustbins are kept, and pushed open the gate that led into the back garden.

The whole lawn was a huge raw crater of upturned earth and clay, nearly three yards in diameter, the displaced soil heaped up round the rim into a sort of miniature rampart about two feet high.

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The floor of the thing, as I stood staring incredulously down into it, was shallow, and rough as a plowed field.

For long seconds I just stood there, rocked by a disbelief so intense that my thought processes were simply at a standstill. Whether such an upheaval could, or could not, have been produced by some extraterrestrial object was simply beyond my power even to wonder.

But presently, in response to some in-built, robot-like impulse of curiosity, I found myself stumbling, in a dazed sort of way, round and round the jagged rim, back and forth across the moonlit clods, my eyes darting hither and thither, sharp as a hawk's, seeking God-alone-knows-what. Some sort of clue to the mystery, I suppose; but since I had no idea what sort of thing I was looking for, everything—but *everything*—seemed to fill me with startled dread.

A sliver of glass glinting in the moonlight, an odd-shaped stone, the edge of a rusty tin—each and all of these things had the power to set my heart thudding, my brain spinning. At this rate it wouldn't be long before I began indeed to see little green men dancing before my weary eyes, hear the tinny little Martian voices in my singing ears . . .

It seemed like hours, though I daresay it was really only a few minutes, before the police came. Within minutes one lot of them had dug up poor Brian's body from the floor of the crater, while another lot had me in for questioning. Sheila must have phoned them as soon as she judged, from her vantage point at some darkened upper window, that my footprints must by now be just about everywhere in the wet clay. It must have been rather a laugh for her—me babbling on about a flying saucer, while all she had to do was to deny flatly the whole absurd rigmarole, and repeat her totally plausible story of having been roused from sleep by strange noises in the garden.

Clever. But not (I am hoping and trusting) quite clever enough. She had overlooked one thing: that it would have been quite beyond the power of any one man to have dug earthworks on this sort of scale in just the two or three hours that had elapsed between the time the Harpers left our house after playing Scrabble and the time the police found me silhouetted against the moon on top of Brian's grave.

Of course, I realize that Sheila didn't know about our Scrabble evening; but this was the sort of thing she should have checked up on.

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Because she, of all people, should have known what a job it was, shifting all that clay, known all too well that it would have taken at least two people working from nightfall until the moon rose to get the job finished; and one of them, at least, would have had to be pretty muscular.

I'll be interested, when the thing gets into the papers, to learn which of all those shoulders that Sheila wept on turned out to be *that* strong.

"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

*SPIRITED STORIES*

*by MARK GRENIER*

The demise of a writer named Dow
(Who wrote tales of who done it and how)
Didn't end his career,
For his yarns still appear;
But, of course, they're all ghost-written now.

"Q"

*GRAVE SITUATION*

*by MARK GRENIER*

It's a story to make the pulse quicken;
Because those whom the killer has stricken
He inters, one and all,
In a garden so small
That the plot is beginning to thicken.

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## DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

*Hal Charles is a pseudonym that hides the identity of two partners-in-fictional-crime. Their first story, "Sudden Death," appeared in the April 7, 1980 issue of EQMM. Their second story is another variation on a Queenian theme . . . (Oh, Ellery, you have sown the dragon's teeth, and behold, they spring forth as dying clues!)*

# THE TALK-SHOW MURDER

**by HAL CHARLES**

No doubt you remember when the whole Frosty LaFontaine mess hit the fan. Who can forget those headlines? *BORDEAUX BARRACUDA DEAD; FEMME FATALE FOUND FILETED.* Well, I was there to turn on the fan.

Every year I do some remotes of my syndicated talk-show, *Rex Rhodes's Roundtable.* Usually my not-too-creative producer Mel Pennell decides on some exotic locale like Atlantic City, Miami Beach, Toledo—you get the picture—and lines up some local celebrities. This time the celebrity came to us.

Having discovered we'd be in Las Vegas, Frosty, who regularly performed her talentless singing act at The Wagon Wheel, called.

"Mon cher," she breathed in that flawed accent of hers, "I just so adore your theme shows, especially that one from Tijuana where you did your salute to divorce. I tell you what—I geev myself to you."

Simultaneously my jaw and the phone dropped. Frosty was almost paranoid about appearing on the tube, afraid she might say something on tape that could be used against her in court. You see, from the moment this little mademoiselle from southern France stepped off the boat, she had pyramided a seemingly innocent smile, some slightly off-color anecdotes, and an ability to discover the silver

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lining in a millionaire's bed into four very successful failures at marriage—sources placed her yearly alimony well into six figures.

"I, Frosty LaFontaine, will be your theme."

Naturally Mel leaped at the opportunity, but then he leaped at anything buttoning an outfit to the left. Anxiously he made all the preparations, but when we arrived at The Wheel on Sunday before the show, Frosty sprung her surprise.

*This Is Your Life* never could have pulled it off, but then Ralph Edwards wasn't a persuasive 40-22-36. Standing on the stage behind the fifty-year-old blonde was The LaFontaine Quartet—her four ex-husbands. How had she managed to assemble the most famous foursome since The Beatles?

Nikki Stavros, who owned the second-largest shipping line in Greece, stepped forward as though by some prearranged signal and presented her with a huge emerald ring. "When I see it, my treasure," he explained, "I see only your eyes." When she first looked into his eyes 30 years ago, she knew her ship had come in.

Oliver Ollinger, who preferred to adorn his mysteries with a pseudonym only slightly more original than his plots—Edgar Allan—advanced to give her a large diamond pin. "So that you, my dear, have something to remember me by." Actually she had the royalties from his last two bestsellers to press between the pages of her memory book.

Paul Evans, the owner of The Wagon Wheel, presented her with a gold serpentine necklace. "Its home is where your heart is, my sweet." Unsaid was that her heart—and body—were always at home in Suite 303 of The Wheel—on the house, of course.

R. K. Rabalais, the commercial jingleman who went from do-re-mi to just dough, handed her a check for $10,000. "It's not worth what it used to be, my songbird." Neither, however, was she. In the last few years Frosty's popularity had plunged lower than her necklines. Obviously, though, she could still make do.

"And you, Rex? What do you have for Frosty?"

Off-guard, I could only invite her to dinner, where I promised to deliver. I sent Mel down to the gift shop while I changed. As I was slipping on my dinner jacket, my out-of-breath producer rushed in.

"Sorry," he panted, "but it was the best I could do."

I was embarrassed, but Frosty was positively exuberant over the present.

"A gold-plated Scrabble game. How nice it is to have a man respect me for something other than my body."

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From that point on, our part of the evening went swimmingly. Frosty explained how generous ex-hubby Number Three had put all five of them—"my little family"—on the first spoke of the third floor. Isolating that group on a single corridor was like trying to store gunpowder in a potbelly stove.

Finally my curiosity overrode my tact. "Why did you bring all your ex's together?"

"Can you keep a secret, mon cher?" she asked, leaning forward seductively. Unlike Frosty, her designer gown had nothing to hide.

I nodded.

"Tomorrow the charts say will bring a significant change to Frosty's life. So at three o'clock on the third day of the third month, Frosty will announce, exclusively to your five million viewers, her retirement from show business."

Anyone who had seen her act would have sworn she'd retired years ago. "But how," I pressed, "did you get four of the world's richest men, four who admittedly hate each other, to appear on my program? After all, this isn't *The Tonight Show.*"

I was hoping she'd tell me I was too modest, but she gave me a straight answer.

"Frosty knows the score, mon cher."

I just bet she did. While most wives were busy cleaning rugs, Frosty was busy looking under them. She'd probably dug up enough dirt to fill the Sahara's swimming pool. After all, shipping titans and record tycoons don't get to the top without burying a few indiscretions. This afternoon's gift-giving ceremony on my show was Frosty's simple way of demonstrating her leverage.

"Frosty has their number," she said, holding up her ring-laden hand, "and she always will."

*Always* lasted about six hours. Frosty's chart had been right. Around three A.M. Monday someone found an unusual place to leave one of The Wagon Wheel's room-service steak knives. And so the five of us had been awakened a little earlier than we planned and led to her empty suite.

Lieutenant Larraby looked less like a cop than Columbo. There were more red lines running across his eyeballs than on a road map, and his face was covered with a stubble making the jump from shadow to full beard. Alternating cigarettes and black coffee, he weaved around Suite 303, seemingly trying harder to stay awake than to solve a crime.

"You talk about your losing streaks," he said to no one in partic-

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ular. "I'm two thousand dollars down to The Sands, I haven't slept all weekend, and now I'm called in to investigate the stabbing of some broad whose voice was scratchier than my old 78's."

"Watch it, Lieutenant!" soloed a member of The LaFontaine Quartet.

Without turning around, the Lieutenant shot back, "Please, no crocodile tears. You can mourn in private when we're finished here. Now, Mr. Evans, let me see if I understand the room arrangements."

Evans nodded as Larraby read from his notepad.

"The Wagon Wheel's unique shape allows you to provide your guests with privacy. Each of the five floors has eight spokes, or corridors, joined to a central elevator and stairwell at the hub."

"Yes. Some parties, some conventions like to isolate themselves from the other guests for business or personal reasons," Evans explained. "The only way onto Spoke A, Frosty's corridor, is through the elevator or stairwell."

"And you had a guard stationed there?"

"Twenty-four hours a day, Lieutenant. Frosty insisted I reserve Spoke A on the third floor for myself. She was into numerology and had a thing about threes. My offices take up Suites 302 through 310, and Suite 312 is my living quarters. The other side of the hall is for—friends. My friend Ollie was in 305, my good friend Nikki was in 309, and my very good friend R. J. —"

"That's R. K.," Rabalais interrupted.

"Of course. He's in 311."

"The guard," continued the still-sleepy policeman, "is there for security reasons, but he can't see down the corridor, right?"

"That's not his job. His purpose is to keep people off the floor, not watch those on it."

Larraby accepted another black coffee from a uniformed policeman.

"I just finished chatting with the man who's been on duty since midnight. Would you believe I broke into the LVPD under him, and now he's watching elevators?"

He paused and shook his head. "But anyway, Cy can be trusted. He said nobody came onto this floor after one o'clock in the morning when Mr. Rhodes left Ms. LaFontaine off. So you, Mr. Rhodes, were the last to see the lady alive."

"Lieutenant," I protested, "I didn't get off the elevator. Ask that guard."

"I did. I just thought she might have said something to you, some-

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thing that might indicate which of these four high-rollers wanted to stop paying alimony."

"What!" they exploded in chorus.

"Please, gentlemen. Other than Ms. LaFontaine, you were the only people on this corridor at the time the M.E. has fixed her death. Nobody else could have come or gone. So one of you is her killer."

Nikki made the first power play. "I don't have to remind you, Lieutenant What's-Your-Name, we're all important men."

"Yeah," chimed in R. K., "I've got a record company to run."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rabalais, but the turntable will have to spin without you for a while. Gentlemen, it's easier here than at the station. Now, wouldn't you rather cooperate?"

"We're not blind," shot in Ollie. "All you have is a victim, a weapon, four suspects, and a guard who couldn't see anything—there are no real clues here."

"Not quite," Larraby said, concentrating on pouring his coffee grounds into a planter. "Ms. LaFontaine was stabbed on the couch. You can see the bloodstains. But when room service found the body this morning, it was slumped over that card table."

Everyone looked.

"And that trail of blood tells me Ms. LaFontaine was a real trouper. She couldn't reach the phone in the bedroom, but, probably after her assailant left, she struggled to the card table."

For the first time I looked carefully. In the center of the table I saw something that scared me, yet I knew I'd better admit to it. "Lieutenant, last night at dinner I gave Frosty that game."

"Then, Mr. Rhodes, you might be interested in what use she put it to. Would you tell these anxious gentlemen exactly what you see on the table."

All the gold pieces were pushed to the side, except three. Across the middle of the board were the letters P O E.

Salt of the earth that they were, the four captains of industry all began to play their own parlor game, *J'accuse!*

R. K. leaped to his feet, rising faster than the BeeGees' latest release. "Ollie, how could you! I knew Frosty was giving you a hard time about the royalties from your next book—she wanted a larger slice. But to kill her, to put a cheap steak knife in her heart. Sounds like one of your hackneyed plots."

Larraby interrupted. "Hold on a minute, Mr. Rabalais. What makes you think Mr. Ollinger's the killer?"

"Who else? Frosty's clue points straight to that hokey pen name

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of his. He's forever bragging about being a direct descendant of Edgar Allan Poe."

Ollie wasn't about to take such an accusation sitting down, and so he stood up, waving his hands as if to clear away the cloud of suspicion surrounding him. "You—you—you record hustler. Everybody knows you're in hock up to your tin ears. Even if that ten-grand check didn't bounce, you'd still be behind in your alimony payments. What a way to get even, to pick on the only person shallow enough to think of you as a poet. And that's what Frosty meant. She was starting to spell out "poet"—POE—but died before she finished."

During their exchange Larraby wrote like a mad stenographer.

"Excuse me," Nikki interrupted, "but as usual both of you are wrong. I happen to know that as of March first Frosty had gained control of The Wagon Wheel stock. Finding Mr. Evans a liability, she planned to kick him out on his assets. Besides, he knew his way around this place better than any of us."

"But the POE clue?" asked R. K.

"If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Evans' middle name is Orin. Paul Orin Evans. P O E."

Unobtrusively placing his hand across the monogram on his bathrobe, Paul moved toward his accuser. "You phony Greek god. Always in the paper with some luscious starlet on your arm. Well, let me tell you Mr. Macho, Frosty wasn't the only one who found out about your special preferences. Yeah, I know all about your 'proteges.' And as for those letters she left—only a shipping magnate would be concerned with Ports of Entry, P. O. E."

As The LaFontaine Quartet continued to sing out of harmony, I kept looking at the letters on the Scrabble board. Sure all four ex's had a motive to kill her and just as surely she was too smart to leave such an ambiguous clue. But was it ambiguous? Or were we looking at it the wrong way?

Calling a cease-fire, Larraby turned to me. "Sounds like your talk show, Mr. Rhodes. Once you get the guests arguing, you just sit back and listen."

I was surprised.

"You watch the *Roundtable?*"

"Never miss it, unless I'm on a hot streak at the casino. Know it or not, you've taught me a lot about interrogation." He struggled to light another cigarette. "Now, as one trained listener to another, are you sure Ms. LaFontaine didn't say anything that would help?"

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"Hey, Lieutenant," Nikki's voice boomed, "we all know the score. You haven't got enough to hold us."

"I'm calling my lawyer," R. K. added.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea, Mr. Rabalais," I said. I quickly scooped up the gold pieces that suddenly made sense. "I should have seen it when Paul detailed the room arrangements. We all know Frosty had a thing about numbers."

I placed the Scrabble letters down in front of the group slowly. "How would you score this word, Lieutenant?"

"Well, the *P* is worth three, the *O* and the *E* one apiece."

"Don't you see. Three and one and one. 311. Mr. Rabalais' room number."

"That doesn't mean anything," R. K. argued. "The others had just as much motive as I did."

"But none of the others knew exactly where Frosty was stabbed. Yet you said in the heart. Lieutenant?"

"That's right," Larraby realized, stubbing out his cigarette. "The body was gone by the time you five got here, and I never mentioned she was stabbed in the heart."

The next five minutes saw the restoration of my faith in human nature. As the uniformed officer led the debt-ridden record mogul away, the other three, suddenly aware of their freedom from alimony, generously offered to set up a defense fund for the fallen member of the foursome.

But there I was, just a few hours from airtime without a guest, and Mel was probably collaring some lively accountant from Oshkosh who'd just broken the bank with his infallible system.

Across the room Larraby fumbled to light a cigarette. "Lieutenant," I called, offering a match, "what are you doing this afternoon, say about three o'clock?"

"Q"

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a *NEW* crime story by

**JEAN DARLING**

*To the best of our recollection, this is the first story we've published in EQMM that takes place in the African country of Liberia—a fascinating locale . . . the tale of Macker Malloy and Shay Toomey, two old shipmates who meet in the stifling heat of Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, and get mutually involved in illicit diamonds, and "wallow in sweat and greed" . . .*

# THE MATCHSTICK HUT

**by JEAN DARLING**

A shimmering blanket of heat lay heavily over Monrovia that day late in the month of March 1957 when the *Siren Call* tied up to off-load cargo. As was his habit in each port, the Captain gave three of his hands shore leave—this time for ten hours, from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Macker Malloy was one of the three.

After leaving the ship he paused to watch camera-laden Americans stream down the gangways of the gaily pennanted *Bergensfjiord* to have their pictures taken with dusky bare-breasted girls grouped here and there along the quay. In the shade cast by customs shed and warehouse walls, souvenir sellers knelt beside cloths spread with ebony carvings and thorny, shellacked blowfish with bulging eyes and tiny open mouths. Pile after pile of red and white bags of Purina Feed, as indigenous to Africa as the mosquito, could be seen through gaping warehouse doors.

Farther along the quay, musicians accompanied animated haystacks who were advertising the straw dances to be held somewhere or other late in the afternoon while, near the water side, a snake charmer posed for a Yankee dollar with his pet's head in his mouth. Men in bright-colored shirts offered tours in antique taxis or on foot;

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each was better than the other, louder than the other, cheaper than the other.

Leaving the dock area behind, Macker Malloy headed along the dusty road into the capital city of Liberia through swarms of insects buzzing on the still air. Like a giant hand, pressing the old beachcomber hat down on his head, the sun squeezed sweat out of him as though he were an overripe fruit. Macker mopped his face with a handkerchief, and taking off his jacket he finger-hooked it over his shoulder. What he needed was a long cool drink in a cool dark bar.

The city itself was alive with strolling couples. Each had a string of Liberian children in tow who teased for oranges being sold at every street corner, peeled and piled on the cement in pyramids of four. As the tall fair-haired Irishman passed, the little orange sellers giggled shyly behind slender long-fingered hands. These girls, like all the other women in town, were covered from neck to ankle in brilliant floral cotton, and their heads were wound in similar cloth. But for all the activity, all the to-ing and fro-ing, there was no place to go.

Macker had walked from one end of the main drag to the other without seeing a single establishment open for business except for one general store at the far end of town and the hotel. He retraced his steps to the hotel but here too a *CLOSED* sign sealed the glass door to the bar despite the fact he could see Americans from the cruise ship crowded around every table.

On being questioned, the desk clerk told Macker it was Sunday, and on Sunday the bar was open only to residents. While speaking, the man had opened the register and produced a pen. "That will be ten dollahs, sah!" His smile was wide and white. Macker shook his head and went back out into the glaring heat. By this time he would have settled for a glass of water or a pyramid of peeled oranges, but the thought of the bout of galloping yab-yabs that would follow dismissed any idea of buying oranges from the little gigglers. If worst came to worst he always could return to the *Siren Call,* but that would be the end of his shore leave. He decided to try the general store at the end of town.

Several people were waiting in line ahead of him, white as well as black. Macker wished the shopkeeper would get the lead out and not chat with each customer. It reminded him of home where everybody's personal affairs had to be discussed at length before a sale could be rung up. He almost had decided to vault the counter and

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grab one of the bottles of soda pop lined along the shelf behind the shopkeeper, when a man gathered up his purchases and turned to go.

"Well, I'll be damned! Macker Malloy!" the man exclaimed, stopping dead in his tracks. "What in hell are you doing in this kip?"

"It can't be—Sergeant-Major Toomey!" Malloy put a hand on Toomey's arm as though to make sure he was real. "Is it truly yourself, Shay Toomey?"

The two men stood laughing at each other, shaking their heads and laughing some more.

"Come on, you old gurrier, I'll buy you a drink." Shay Toomey crossed the street and led the way along a sidewalk that sprouted pavement at intervals to a low building. At the back of a deep stoep two large shop windows framed a door on which *QUANTITY SURVEYOR* had been painted. "Will you do the honors?" Shay asked, standing to one side while Macker opened the door into a dingy office empty of furniture except for a table, a camp bed, and an ancient safe with its door sagging open. A map of Africa was thumbtacked on one wall and a single light bulb dangled from the ceiling along with a number of flypaper ribbons black with victims.

"So what brings you down this way?" Toomey dropped his purchases on the camp bed behind the table that was covered from one edge to the other with a rambling monstrosity built of matchsticks. "Six boxes, that's all he'll give me at a time. But he did give me a pot of glue!" His tone was triumphant.

"You building this—whatever it is?"

"Now I am. Turn on the fan, why don't you? The switch is over there by the door." Macker obliged and the fan, perched on a high shelf wedged in a corner, began to wag back and forth. "Come on through, the fridge is in here." The room beyond held another camp bed, a sink, a kerosene stove, and an old-fashioned tin bathtub filled with water and bottles of beer. A small fan perched on a chair rippled the water. "The fridge," Shay said, reaching in for two bottles of beer. "Wrap yourself around that."

And so they sat drinking beer and reminiscing about all the grand times they had shared in Italy while serving with the British Eighth Army during World War II. When the sun brinked to begin its long journey down to the horizon, they switched to whiskey and subjects more current, like just exactly what set of circumstances had dropped both of them in Monrovia.

With Macker, boredom had been the catalyst that sent him to sea.

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"I get back to Ireland to see the wife every three, four months for a few days. That's enough."

Shay nodded, his face creased with drunken understanding. "I suppose you're wondering how I came to bed down in this little paradise on earth."

"I wouldn't say it was because you liked it, but I'd guess you're probably making money." Macker got another bottle of beer to chase down the whiskey. "How did you get into surveying?"

"Like it? Here? You must be joking. Why even the President—you saw that big white yacht when you came in to port this morning?" Malloy nodded. "That's where Tubman lives and he's the President, so that should give you an idea." He slopped whiskey into their glasses. "Slainte!" he said.

"Slainte!" Macker echoed the Gaelic toast.

"As for making money, I haven't seen any in so long I've forgotten what it looks like."

"Come off it, no one can live without money. What about the matches and stuff you bought at the shop? That took money."

Toomey shook his head. "It's all on the house, so it is. Let me show you something," he said, fumbling three large white pebbles from his pocket. He handed them to his friend who set down his glass and studied each one carefully, his pulse rising.

"Diamonds," he breathed. "Uncut diamonds."

"They are o'course." Shay snatched the stones and dropped them back in his shirt pocket.

"Is that the lot? Only the three?"

Toomey ignored the questions. "I'll begin—at the beginning. Me?—I survey nothing. Willie Schultz surveys." He was very drunk by now, and his words slurred together. "Poor old Willis Schultz." He groped for the bottle, and it tipped. Macker caught it before its contents spilled onto the floor.

"Steady, lad," Macker said, dividing the remainder between the two glasses.

"Thanks, mate. —I was on this ship coming up from Cape Town. One of those deals you hang around a port asking till you find a captain who'll carry you for a pound a day. Well, we stopped here to take on cargo. It's Firestone Rubber land, you know. Would you believe nobody's paid till all the sap's in. If the workers are paid they won't work again till the money's gone. And you know the dames? They carry little bundles of cloth to wear in town—it's illegal to go bare-breasted within the city limits. God, civilization is dirty-

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minded." His head fell forward and he drowsed over his glass. Macker shook him.

"Wake up!" He slapped Toomey's cheeks. "Wake up!"

"Huh?—huh?" Shay waved him away. "What do you want?"

"You were telling me about the diamonds and if you have any more."

"Oh. No, I wasn't—hadn't got there yet—so the ship tied up and I came ashore and got drunk. It wasn't Sunday, so I got drunk and ended up in the cop shop. Willie Schultz got me out, but by then it was too late—my ship had sailed o'course, so Willie took me in." He wiped his hand over his face. "That matchstick Banshee hut out there's Willie's. He started it, says he, so's he wouldn't go bonkers waiting for the chance to escape."

"Escape from what?"

"He was building some kind of a church, says he, but I just put on matches till the table was covered, and then I started another layer. Now it's so big it has to be put down on the floor. I don't know how, but it has to be so."

"You'd best give over playing with toys and get out of here—"

"Don't be a fool, mate, I can't. I'm a prisoner watched twenty-four hours a day."

"Go 'way with that. I didn't see anyone watching you when we walked from the shop."

"Sorry, lad." Toomey lurched out the back door to a hut at the end of the high-walled yard. When he came back he seemed almost sober. "Come on. I want to show you something." He went to the safe and took out a Hershey Bar carton. The inside bottom was covered with a thin layer of white pebbles like the ones in his pocket. "There you are. A present fit for the Aga Khan's birthday."

"You just leave all those diamonds in an unlocked safe?" Macker's voice was hoarse with desire. "Where did you get them?" he breathed, pouring a half-dozen stones from one hand to the other, his eyes glittering with avarice.

"Willie said they came from Sierra Leone. I don't know how he came to have them, but it was illegal, that much I do know."

"How do you come to have them? Did Schultz just leave you minding the shop?"

Shay Toomey shook his head. "Willie died," he said after a pause. "The reason I have them is because Willie couldn't take them with him. —He couldn't take them with him," he repeated, laughing until the tears ran down his cheeks. "Hey, that's a good one. Willie

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couldn't take them with him and I can't take them with me." Suddenly he was serious.

"So why the hell don't you stop moaning about being watched and walk to the quay and climb on the first ship that sails? That's what I'd do. What do you want to bet I could tip that lot in my pockets and walk out that door and board the *Siren Call*—"

"Ah, it's not boarding the ship," Shay interrupted. "I can do that. Sure I can walk out that door and board any ship I fancy but—that's the operative word 'but.' *I* can go—*but* without the diamonds. And unless I can take every one of those dirty-looking bits of glass with me, I'm not going—it's as simple as that.

"Look, I'll show you. If I go this way"—he moved over to the map of Africa and waved his hand in a 180-degree arc around the western coast of Liberia—"I'm in trouble with DeBeers."

"DeBeers?"

"The South African diamond cartel. They check the source of every uncut gem stone offered for sale anywhere in the world in this year of our Lord 1957. That's how the market is controlled. If I went that way and tried to sell even one stone it would be confiscated and I'd be locked up for a month of Sundays. Hell, if they saw this lot, they'd throw away the key! You can't blame them, really. If they weren't careful, man, they'd be robbed blind. Illegal stones flooding the market would bring down prices.

"Now, if I go this way"—he punched Sierra Leone with a fingertip balled from years of nail biting—"I'm dead. The authorities there know all about Willie's diamonds, so just one step over the border—" He shot himself in the temple with his finger. "Stealing their diamonds can be a capital offense."

"So why don't you travel across Africa to the East Coast? There you could get a boat or, better still, a plane. With the kind of money that lot would bring you could live like a king for the rest of—"

"East Africa or West, what difference would that make to DeBeers? DeBeers' octopus is all over the world, can't you get that through your stupid head? A polished stone ready to be set as jewelry? No problem. It's uncut ones that mean trouble. Here the stones are safe—it's neutral territory."

"You say you've got no money. Who pays for this place, the stuff you get at the shop, the booze?"

"I don't know—whoever paid for Willie, of course. Some guerilla leader hoping to overthrow one of these shaky African states, I guess. And when *whoever* takes over *wherever,* he'll probably put

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the stones on the market claiming to have found a new small dig and use the money to consolidate his position."

Shay picked up a match from a pile at the edge of the table. "It's best to burn the stuff off, then spread a thin bit of glue along the side and press it into place. There. Can't do this for long though, it's too high. Makes my arms tired."

He built in silence for a while as Macker squatted on the end of the bed, the Hershey Bar carton on his knees, examining first one stone and then another, the need to possess them growing within him like a mushroom in a rain forest.

"Why would anyone like that feed you and Willie? Wouldn't it be simpler to have you deported or eliminated?" Malloy asked, glancing up.

"They can't deport me, they're not Liberians—at least, I don't think they are." Shay rubbed his hand across his mouth. "Whoever pays the bills gets his kicks watching a white man wallow in sweat and greed. It's a good way to pass time while keeping the loot on ice—let the sucker dream his alcoholic dreams before snuffing him like a candle. What do you know, I'm getting to be a golden-tongued Irishman!"

He paused, gazing at a small blob of glue glowing amber in the light. "What I'm waiting for is Southern Africa to blow up politically, then perhaps the DeBeers stranglehold will be broken. If at the same time whoever's keeping tabs on me relaxes his vigilance, maybe I can get out with both the stones and my skin intact."

"And nobody's ever tried to rob you?" Malloy sat the box on the bed.

"Ah, no. I'm safe as houses if I stay within the boundary lines—from here to the shop and back, and across the street to the pub. But one step out of line and some big black yokes with high-powered rifles are waiting to pick me off. They're not only to keep me in, you know, they're to keep stealers out. Hell, I need another beer." He moved into the other room with his friend close behind.

As he bent over the tub, Macker's hand rose and cracked down on the back of his neck. The move was made without conscious premeditation. It was as though the hand, recognizing opportunity, acted with a mind of its own. Down it chopped and Toomey's upper body splashed into the water threatening to drag the tub over on its side. Macker steadied it while holding his friend's head under the water until the bubbles stopped rising. Then the fair-haired Irishman carefully eased the body to the floor.

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An hour and a half later Shay Toomey was buried beside a similar mound in the high-walled back yard and the diamonds were all tucked away in the money belt Macker Malloy girded himself with, rich or poor. He shrugged on his jacket and looked around to make sure nothing had been forgotten. The tub was full of water, the little fan buzzing away, the floor had been mopped dry. On the bed lay clothes and pillows bundled into a satisfactory "sleeper" covered with a blanket.

The Hershey box, back in the safe, contained ordinary pebbles that Malloy had gathered while digging the grave.

He checked his watch—6:40. Time to make for the ship, he thought, running his hand over the matchstick monstrosity. He was filled with scorn that anyone could have been stupid enough to waste his life playing with a useless toy. If Shay Toomey couldn't have got away with the diamonds, he should have cut and run. Freedom was the most valuable thing in the world to Macker. Sure he'd try to make off with the stones, but if it wasn't in the cards, no one would catch him wasting time gluing matchsticks together.

For the benefit of anyone who might be watching, he paused on the stoep calling goodbyes to Shay, and promises to stop by the next time the *Siren Call* was in port. "Okay, I'll call your mother. No, I won't forget—soon as I get home. See you," he shouted, and hat on the back of his head, thumbs hooked in his belt, Malloy strolled toward the harbor. No one on earth would ever guess a king's ransom in diamonds encircled his waist, not even the riflemen who had put the wind up Shay Toomey—if there were any. More probably the heat had worked on his friend's mind, the heat and booze.

As he walked, Malloy made plans. He would stay with the ship until the end of this run, then a couple of quick backroom sales in London would buy him passage on the Queen Elizabeth II. He'd like a world cruise, being waited on hand and foot. And he'd be smart—he'd sell the rest of the stones one at a time in a port here, a port there—that way he'd be safe as houses. Not even DeBeers would worry about an odd uncut diamond, he reassured himself as he neared the general store, closed now and padlocked. Except for a group of Americans a hundred yards away who were on their way back to the *Bergensfjiord,* the street was empty. He quickened his pace—he would feel less conspicuous in their midst. Not that he put any faith in Shay Toomey's blatherings about being constantly watched.

Malloy was almost past the shop now, past the limit his friend

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had put on his right to stay alive. Just one more step would prove Toomey a liar or a fool—or both.

But Malloy never made that step.

Twenty feet in front of him a huge black man, cradling a rifle in the crook of his arm, stepped into his path. Beyond, he could see the Americans small in the distance compared with the giant blocking his way. If he could reach them he'd be home and dry, he thought, his heart pounding. No gunman would fire willy-nilly into a group of passengers from the first real cruise ship to call at Monrovia. So smile at the man, wave your hand, now turn around like a good boy and take one—two—three steps toward the survey office, spin around, and run like hell for the tourists.

Suiting actions to thoughts, Malloy's long legs ate up the distance between himself and the Americans, the black man politely having stepped to one side. Mid-stride, Macker stopped dead in his tracks. Then, whirling around, he raced back toward Shay's place. A shout or two from the curious Americans dwindled as he ran. The sudden reversal of Malloy's flight had been caused by a single sentence spoken by the rifleman as he passed.

"Just beyond the hotel, man, I'll kill you," he said, swinging the rifle up into position.

On nearing the office, Malloy saw that a second rifleman was barring his passage in that direction, putting paid to any notion he might have had about ducking around the side of a house and doubling back to the quay. For a moment Macker stood looking from one man to the other. Then, shrugging, he went inside. He had been caught in the same trap that had caught Sergeant-Major Toomey who lay dead beside the man he had murdered for a double fistful of uncut diamonds.

Malloy wondered how the riflemen had known Shay Toomey was dead. It must have been the digging, he decided. That was where he had made his mistake. He should have left the body under the blanket instead of pillows. Burying him had been a bad mistake. Burying him had taken too much time. If he had left at 5:30 or 6:00—but that wouldn't have helped either. The *Siren Call* wasn't due to sail until 8:00. The gunmen would have hunted him down on the ship.

Malloy switched on the light. He crossed to the camp bed and picked up a box of matches. One after the other he struck them, then blew them out. He took off his coat, swatted mosquitos, made a mental note to buy new ribbons of flypaper first thing next morn-

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ing. Macker glued a few matches here and there along the top of the edifice, all the time thinking—thinking—trying to find some way out—with the diamonds—of course.

After a few minutes his arms grew tired. Shay Toomey was right, the damned thing was too high. He went into the next room for a bottle of beer, then decided against it. Better get back to the matchsticks, he told himself. Keep busy, that's the answer. His mind had to be clear to figure out a way to scarper with the diamonds, and it wouldn't be if he allowed himself to fall into the bottle the way Toomey had. He had to keep busy if he didn't want to go nuts.

Besides, if he seemed to accept captivity, there was a possibility he might find out the reason for this weird setup, find out whether it—whatever it was—were political or some kind of "private" caper. If he seemed a weakling, perhaps the watchers would grow lax.

Malloy tried pushing the matchstick monstrosity to the edge of the table. There was an ominous crackling sound and some matches crumbled off one side. It was too fragile to be moved even if there had been several people to help him. But if he were to keep a clear head it would be easy to work on.

Macker Malloy took a not too clean handkerchief from his jacket pocket and went outside. He strode boldly along the street with the handkerchief held aloft. One step past the general store the rifleman appeared. Macker went up to him. He spoke. The man nodded. Macker returned to the house to wait.

Ten minutes later four tall black men walked in the door. The one holding the gun stood beside Macker Malloy as two others, one at each end, held up the table while the fourth man sawed off the table's legs. That done, the matchstick Banshee hut was lowered carefully to the floor.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

**THOMAS WALSH**

*Detective Rafferty was almost an eyewitness. He thought the truth of the matter stared him in the face. But Inspector Iron Mike Birmingham was an old hand in these investigations. He never jumped the gun, especially in a "husband-and-wife thing." Get the facts, he insisted. "The way it looks isn't necessarily the way it is" . . .*

# THE WAY IT LOOKS

*by THOMAS WALSH*

Walter Rafferty was just in the nick of time that night. Not only did he get a brief glimpse of what by all odds must have been the getaway car, but he also, because of instinctive professional habit, tucked it away in his mind with one or two very important details. About the driver, who had his head turned in the other direction, he was not so sure. Young, it seemed to him, average size, dark pullover sweater. But he was altogether positive about the car. So it was all in his mind a minute or so later on, every bit of it put together for him—the battered old jalopy, the driver, the time, the neighborhood, and the deed. Q.E.D.

About the car, anyone at all would have been dead certain. It was one of a kind. In make and color it was an old yellow Ford convertible, with a bold female nude posed like Diana the huntress as the radiator ornament. It had sportily glittering wheel covers; the right part of the windshield was cracked, and the front fender on Rafferty's side had been crumpled in noticeably. Racing out of the side street at about 55 miles an hour against a red light, the Ford cut off a taxicab that had to brake desperately, and then zoomed off even faster than 55 along Lexington Avenue.

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Rafferty turned to look after it, his lips pursed. Crazy damned fool! But it was a rainy and wind-lashed autumn night; the taxicab, already occupied, was the only other vehicle to be seen at half-past two in the morning; so all Rafferty could do was watch the convertible race off into another side street two or three blocks farther along. The deeply humming, big-city silence drifted back, after which, just as Rafferty swung into his own street, a girl ran out onto the steps of a tall gray apartment building halfway along the block and began screaming and screaming . . .

"Prettiest girl you'd ever want to see, too," Rafferty explained perhaps a little bit too enthusiastically next morning to Inspector Birmingham. "A figure that would knock your eye out, kind of tall and elegant, you know; very dark and kind of dreamy blue eyes; and real blonde hair that comes all the way down to her shoulders."

"Dark and dreamy," Iron Mike grunted, without raising his eyes from some other report on his desk, but quite obviously not missing anything. "I see. I also see that she must have used them on you pretty good last night. I thought you were a married man, Rafferty. Is that right?"

"Well, sure," Rafferty said, at once innocently virtuous. "Of course. Don't think that I—"

"Then don't make me think," Iron Mike grunted. "What was she doing in the apartment-house vestibule at that hour of night? You asked her, didn't you?"

"Lives there," Rafferty said, teeth delicately together. Damned old buzzard! Always putting the knock on you, to show his authority. "On the fourth floor. And just coming home from a date, that's why. I couldn't quiet her down for about ten minutes, but I wouldn't say you could blame her. She saw the whole thing."

"Which was what?"

Damn it, give me a chance, Rafferty thought grimly, but did not utter, not to Iron Mike. Instead, he took a careful breath, composing himself, and trying to anticipate and maneuver around another of Inspector Birmingham's famous trap questions.

"The fellow she was out with had just dropped her off before the thing happened. She was unlocking the street door when she saw these two other people who have an apartment on the twelfth floor waiting for the elevator. Then she sees something else—this guy darting out from kind of a dark alcove near the back of the hall and pulling a knife on Tolliver. Tolliver grabs for him. They begin fight-

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ing. But the guy is knocked off balance by Tolliver, stumbles into Mrs. Tolliver, or else she into him, and stabs her right in the heart when his arm is jerked up. Then he knocks Miss Sanderson out of the way, runs out into the street, and jumps into his car."

"Wait a minute," Iron Mike put in, with a very brief upward look over his eyeglasses. "You mean the girl saw him do that?"

"Didn't have to," Rafferty said, just as curtly. "How else does it fit? I was coming home along Lexington Avenue from the subway station, and I saw him come out of that sidestreet like a bat out of hell. We got quite a break, Inspector. We'll locate that car, and when we do locate it we'll have the guy. This thing is open-and-shut."

"Is it?" Iron Mike said, pushing back in his swivel chair, placing both hands on the desk and studying Rafferty up and down with no favor. "Well, well, well. Very glad you told me, Rafferty. I wouldn't have suspected it myself. You mean that there couldn't have been two men—one fellow who ran out of the apartment vestibule after stabbing Mrs. Tolliver and vanished somewhere, and another one who just happened to drive by at that moment with maybe a few drinks in him, and in a bit of a hurry to get somewhere?"

"Well, sure," Rafferty had to admit. "There could have been two men. But what I figure—"

"Is usually and almost infallibly one hundred percent wrong," Iron Mike trumpeted. "Is this a husband-and-wife thing or isn't it? And what's the first thing we do—the very first thing, Rafferty—when a husband or wife is killed suddenly?"

"Check up on how they were getting along," Rafferty had to admit a bit smugly, ready for that, at any rate. "Find out if the whole thing was a put-up job, with one party trying to get rid of the other."

"And you checked that part out, of course?"

"You mean already?" Rafferty asked, pushing the pin a little himself now. "In just five or six hours? Well, not completely, Inspector. Now I'm just trying to tell you how it looked last night to me and the precinct men."

"You fellows are always *going* to do something you should have thought of first thing," Iron Mike gritted. "Every damned one of you. Well, don't be going to, Rafferty. Get busy on it right now, and do a little honest work for a change. Don't jump the gun and tell me what you think. Get me the facts. Haven't you learned yet in this job that the way it looks isn't necessarily the way it is? You know the car, you say, and you'd know the fellow who was driving it?"

"Pick it out of a million," Rafferty said. "The guy, too. But I never

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thought, until the Sanderson girl ran out on the stoop and began screaming—"

"Correct," Iron Mike said. "You never do think, somehow, or not in time, at any rate. Ah, you're brilliant, Rafferty. Got the whole thing open-and-shut already. But let me tell you what it signifies to me so far. Not a damn thing. Well, God help your poor brains. Send in Andy Bennett and Jack Kollecker to me. Then go out and find the car for yourself, since you're so positive about that angle. Go on, I tell you. What the hell are you waiting for? Attend to your work. Don't stand there looking at me with a face like a bad potato on you."

So Rafferty did get out, put properly in his place, and only when safely outside complained to Fat John Kollecker about the treatment he had received.

"The thing's staring you right in the face," he declared bitterly. "But not with that old buzzard. He just never gives you any credit at all. What could be any plainer than this setup? But he won't buy it from me, or not until he's run my tail into the ground to throw his weight around. Jump, jump, jump. But one day I just might shove it right back down his throat. What the hell is he trying to make out of this, anyway?"

Yet after that, under Iron Mike's explicit instructions, two roads were explored. Fat John and Andy Bennett pursued the husband-and-wife angle, and Rafferty went after the car harder than he had ever gone after anything in his life. Stupid, was he? Careless, slipshod, always ready to jump the gun, was he? Well, they'd see. Somebody would have to eat crow, but that somebody was not going to be Walter Rafferty.

So Rafferty scoured the neighborhood doggedly, twelve hours the first day, longer than that the second. He talked to children playing in the streets; he talked to people lounging on street corners; he talked to shopkeepers. And on the third morning, not knowing where to turn next—because who knew if the the man who had killed Mrs. Tolliver even lived in the neighborhood?—he was standing on a streetcorner in almost savage despair when he saw the car for a second time.

But he only saw it out of the corner of his eye, for a brief second, as it whipped very fast again into the next sidestreet down from him. Rafferty had long legs, however, and Rafferty ran very fast, knocking people out of his way with no apology, and even jumping over two small boys who were playing marbles along the curb. It

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was no good. There were parked cars all along the street he wanted, but none of them was the yellow convertible. It had vanished.

There was no point walking into the street then, but Rafferty did, for no sensible reason, apart from Iron Mike. A bakery shop, a radio store, a church crowded in by tenements on both sides, a supermarket with a parking space—and in the parking space, when Rafferty glanced in, and almost unseeingly, the yellow convertible in the first spot off the street. Rafferty lit a cigarette, feeling just fine then, and took up position in a convenient doorway. He moved away from it only when two young men came out of the supermarket loaded with bags, and put them into the yellow convertible. One was a husky blond kid, who looked as if he didn't have a care in the world. The other, thin and very quick-moving, wore a pullover sweater and had haggard and wearily haunted dark eyes. He was the one who got into the convertible, and drove off. Rafferty let him go. There was no problem any more. Rafferty now had the license number.

"Hey, Bud," Rafferty called to the other boy, who was whistling his way back to the supermarket. "That fellow you were just talking to, in that yellow car. Looked something like a friend of mine, Jack Farrell. Is that his name?"

Of course it wasn't. But then Rafferty had the right name, Paul Kovacs, and a little further information. Paul Kovacs worked in the store as a delivery boy, and he had just started out on another round.

"Okay, made a mistake." Rafferty grinned, and from a corner drugstore, not to start tongues wagging, phoned the store manager. After that he had about everything he wanted. Paul Kovacs was 17 years old, and he had worked in the store for three months. It was a store that delivered, and two of the customers to whom it delivered were Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Tolliver.

"So it's the husband-and-wife thing, all right," Rafferty explained a bit later to Iron Mike. "I'd say this Tolliver tips the kid pretty good when he delivers the groceries, gets real friendly with him and sizes him up. Then when he's sure what kind he is, the kind of young punk that will do anything for a buck, he makes the proposition to him.

"Nothing to it, he probably coaxed the kid. Easy as pie. They'll fake a purse-snatching, making sure there's an outside witness around, this Miss Sanderson, and kill Mrs. Tolliver without anyone thinking twice about it. Tolliver will describe the wrong guy to me, which he did. Miss Sanderson described the kid pretty good, she's

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the honest witness, but Tolliver describes him all wrong, because he's the lying witness. I'd say he slipped the kid five hundred, or maybe a thousand, and the kid jumped at it. Easy money, all right, and now Tolliver and the kid think they've pulled it off on us."

"Maybe it is," Iron Mike admitted, rubbing his mouth petulantly. Of course, Rafferty thought. Always wants to tell *you* how it was, not you tell him. "But one question, Rafferty. How did they know that Miss Sanderson would come along right then and back up their story? She was only coming in through the street door when it all happened, you told me."

"They could have waited for her," Rafferty insisted, "or waited for anyone to show up. It's a glass door, and Tolliver must have seen her through it getting her keys out. Then he must have signaled the kid. 'Come on, come on. Right now. We're all set.' "

"And how about the elevator?" Iron Mike asked him, as if he hadn't heard. "Suppose it came down just then with three or four men inside and they grabbed this Paul Kovacs? Then they'd be taking a hell of a chance, Rafferty. No. It doesn't fit that way. And how could he keep his wife waiting and waiting for the elevator—waiting for the Sanderson girl to come in—when he didn't know she was even coming in?"

"Could have been something between him and the girl," Rafferty said, as if suddenly inspired. "I tell you she's a real knockout, Inspector, and they lived in the same house. Maybe that's it. Maybe they had something going between them."

"Maybe, maybe, maybe. Well, to hell with your maybes, Rafferty. I want the facts. And besides, it wasn't Tolliver running around on Mrs. Tolliver. Andy Burnett tells me it was the exact opposite. For quite a few years now Mrs. Tolliver has been running around on him. Three years ago she left him for another man, and he was damned fool enough to take her back after it. Just mad crazy about the woman, from what Andy found out."

"Then maybe dough," Rafferty thought up. "He could have had her insured for fifty or a hundred thousand dollars—or she might have had money of her own."

"Not a red cent," Iron Mike shot out curtly. "And no insurance, either. No, the money was all his, and he appears to have loved the woman. Which leaves us where?"

Rafferty could not say. Offer an angle, he was thinking bitterly, and the old buzzard ripped it to bits—and enjoyed doing it. Rafferty's lips curled.

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"Wouldn't care to suggest anything at all," he snapped. "What the hell's the use?"

"I take it you mean with me," Iron Mike shot back, even more curtly. "Well, in five or ten years, Rafferty, I might be able to make a competent and intelligent police officer out of you, but you aren't one yet, and don't think it. I tell you there's something else here that none of us have looked at yet in the right way. But now pick up the Kovacs boy, while Andy Burnett gets in touch with Tolliver and the Sanderson girl. If they both identify him for us, wonderful. If they don't, we'll have to trip him up one way or another out of his own mouth. Get on it."

So Rafferty did, with a convenient precinct man. They went back to the supermarket in a squad car and found Paul Kovacs in back of the store, unpacking pork and beans on one of the shelves. He knew at once what they wanted, without even asking them—a telltale sign. When the precinct man flashed his badge, Paul Kovacs only nodded silently—as if almost from relief, it seemed to Rafferty—and took off his apron.

On the way downtown the precinct man asked two or three questions, but Kovacs would not answer. Both hands were clasped between his knees, and there was something lost and hopeless in the way he kept watching them. Toward the end of their ride he suddenly made a low sound in the throat and covered his eyes.

Upstairs in the building there were two rooms with a panel of one-way glass between them. Rafferty and the others could see Paul Kovacs through that, but he could not see them. He stood with five other men in the lineup, second from the left, and stared straight ahead, wetting his lips. Iron Mike took charge.

"Now I want you to tell me," he instructed Tolliver and the Sanderson girl, "if either of you recognize one of the men on the other side of this window. If you do, go back into the hall outside and tell Andy Burnett which man it is. That's all. But everything has to be shipshape and regular here, with no hint of collusion. Take your time now. But don't talk to each other, don't even look at each other. Step up to the window, look at the men in line, make up your mind—and that's all. Do just what I've told you."

So they did, and Rafferty could see that the girl knew at once. Her eyes touched Paul Kovacs, stopped on him—and she moved a fearful step or two back from the window. Tolliver, a tall thin man with a gaunt face and brooding dark eyes, showed nothing at all. One by one he looked at the men, taking the same time and care

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with each of them. After that he turned, still without any expression, and walked out to the hall.

"Think we got it all set," Andy Burnett boasted, hurrying in a few seconds later. "The girl identified Kovacs right off the bat, Inspector. Just positive, she told me. And one's enough, isn't it? All we need."

"You never have all you need," Iron Mike rasped. "And if you think that you do, with all these damned shyster lawyers around, you're nothing but a damned fool. Tolliver had just as good a look at the boy. Then why wouldn't he make the identification for us?"

"Told you before," Rafferty had to put in. He felt fine. "They're in it together, that's why. Tolliver's trying to cover up for him."

Iron Mike did not answer. He walked over to the open street window—it was a very humid day for October—and stared out of it while patting his hands irritably behind him. Finally he turned.

"Bring Kovacs in here," he directed then, "and bring Tolliver in here. And don't say a word, any of you, until I show that I want you to. For the present just keep your eyes open. I'll do whatever talking I think necessary."

At first, however, it seemed that no talking at all was necessary. There was perfect stillness in the room. Paul Kovacs did not look at Tolliver, but kept his eyes lowered. His lips had puffed out slightly. His expression, what Rafferty could see of it, was one of blind hate.

When Iron Mike finally spoke, at least a full minute later, he used an indifferent, completely disinterested tone of voice.

"Still no good?" he inquired of Tolliver. "You never saw this fellow before in your life? He isn't the man who murdered your wife the other night?"

"No, he isn't," Tolliver said, also evenly. "Nothing like him. He's not the man."

"Then that's a very queer thing," Iron Mike said, pursing his lips for a moment. "From what I understand, he's been delivering groceries to your apartment for five or six months now. But still, you never saw saw him before—not last Friday night, and not anywhere?"

"That's right," Tolliver said, turning his eyes slowly to Iron Mike and keeping them there. And now there was no mistaking the blind hatred in Paul Kovacs. He looked up at Tolliver, lips contracting, both hands clenched. Andy Burnett and Rafferty moved an unobtrusive step closer to him.

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Tolliver said, "I'm a nine-to-five man at the office, Inspector, and I imagine the groceries are delivered sometime in the afternoon. He'd have dealt with Mrs. Tolliver, not with me."

"With Mrs. Tolliver," Iron Mike grunted. "Not with you. So that's it. Tell me something. Did you and Mrs. Tolliver have a good marriage? Were there no problems or difficulties at all between you?"

"Not even the slightest," Tolliver said. "Helen and I—"

"Damned liar," the boy said, his body shaking as if in the grip of a high wind. "Stinking damned liar. She hated your guts—and you know it!"

Still without looking back at the boy, Tolliver took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed his lips calmly.

"Oh?" And Iron Mike turned to regard Paul Kovacs. "You know that for a fact, Paul?"

"I know it and he knows it," Paul Kovacs gritted. "Lousy rotten skunk. He never treated her right. He—"

It was beginning to come then, and Rafferty got a slight movement of the left eyebrow from Iron Mike.

"Now come on, come on," Rafferty ordered. "You'd better start looking out for yourself, kid. We know how and why it all happened Friday night. We know how the whole thing was set up, so don't be stupid enough to deny it. If you do, you know what will happen? You're going to be all the way up the creek, you little punk, and without a paddle. You'd better start talking."

"That's right, lad," Iron Mike warned seriously—the avuncular touch. "The girl identified you. Rafferty here can identify you, and identify your car. You killed Mrs. Tolliver Friday night and we all know it. Now tell us why."

Paul Kovacs darted his eyes around the room desperately; but no help. Tolliver and Iron Mike faced him from the other side of the table. On his right stood Andy Burnett, and on his left, Walter Rafferty.

"Now don't let them fool you," Tolliver said, still icily calm and composed. "They know nothing at all. They're only guessing. If you keep your mouth shut now, and don't answer even one question until your lawyer gets here, which is your constitutional right—"

"Yeah?" Rafferty grated at him, to shut that off. "We know nothing at all, hah? Then tell me this. You didn't describe this kid to me Friday night. You lied about him, saying he was about forty years old, and maybe a Puerto Rican. And you lied about what a happy marriage you and your wife had. She left you three times that we

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know of, and last time she lived eleven months with another guy. When she finally came back to you, you beat her up—and that's a matter of police record. So don't you just stand there and try to tell us—"

"Which didn't matter at all," Tolliver replied with the same rigid calmness of tone. "The thing that did matter was that I loved Helen, and Helen loved me."

"Never," the boy whispered. "Never, you rotten lying—"

He was very quick. He tried to get over the table at Tolliver, but Rafferty and Andy Burnett, already alerted, were quicker. They caught him between them and threw him back, where he crouched down at the open window. He was like a child there, Rafferty saw. He was actually sobbing.

"Never," he screamed at Tolliver. "Never *you*. She loved me, she loved me, she loved me!"

"So that's it," Rafferty heard Iron Mike murmur. "The whole bunch of us have been looking at the thing backwards. We all—stop him, Rafferty! Grab him! Get his legs!"

But that time Rafferty had no chance. Paul Kovacs had lurched back into the open window, the blinding tears still in his eyes, and as Rafferty lunged he kicked himself out of the window. For a moment he seemed to float lazily, spreadeagled on empty air. Then, in about half an instant, he seemed to dwindle down and away with fantastic and inconceivable speed. It was eight stories down, and at the last instant Rafferty pulled his head back into the room, not to see.

"So all right." A shaken Rafferty tried to defend himself a minute or so later down on the pavement. "What the hell did you expect me to think, when Tolliver kept lying and lying the way he did? He saw the kid Friday night even closer up than Miss Sanderson, and he wouldn't admit it. He described somebody else to me right out of his head. I don't know why. I can't even guess, Inspector. He just had to put the kid up to it, didn't he?"

Iron Mike was looking down at a shapeless something or other between them that was all covered over by a dirty old tarpaulin. He had a very curious expression on his face, for Iron Mike.

"I think he lied to you," he said slowly, "because he loved the woman. Oh, I know, I know. After the way she'd treated him? But some day you'll find out there are times when that doesn't matter at all, Rafferty—and it didn't with that fellow. And maybe, despite

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all her flings, he was the only man who really mattered to her. That's why she tried to protect him Friday night by pushing herself in between him and the boy.

"She knew right away what was up, and she knew who caused it—herself. So at the end your friend Tolliver tried in turn to protect her, by keeping another little escapade of the woman's out of public knowledge. She did her best to protect him, and he did his best after the thing happened to protect her. That's why he lied to you. Despite everything, he still loved the woman, Rafferty."

"Some love," Rafferty growled. "Whatever it was, he sure bollixed everything up anyway. Because how it looked to me—"

"How it looks to Mr. Rafferty," Iron Mike advised, "isn't always and necessarily the way it is. I'd remember that. What went on between Mrs. Tolliver and the poor silly young lad here, I don't know, and I don't care to know. Very probably nothing at all. She might have only been keeping her hand in with Paul Kovacs by turning his head with her cunning tricks and her beguiling manners.

"But what probably started out as a joke to her soon became dead-earnest to the boy here, or so I'd say. How old was he? Seventeen, was it? And at that age—well, just think back to what he screamed at us upstairs a few minutes ago. 'She loved me, she loved me, she loved me!' Which showed that he believed what he said, all right. A boy his age was simply no match for her."

"Then maybe she put him up to it," Rafferty urged. "Led him on little by little until he agreed to kill the husband for her. Until she got him so worked up and excited—"

"God save your poor head," Iron Mike answered to that. "If that was the case, why did she push herself in between them Friday night? No, no. I don't think she had any idea of what the boy had made up his mind to do until that moment. She might even have tried to break it off with him, but he wouldn't have it. She had got more than she bargained for. Paul Kovacs alone must have decided that if only the husband stood in the way of true love, then the husband had to go.

"It wasn't Tolliver's idea, Rafferty, and it wasn't Mrs. Tolliver's. But take a boy seventeen years old, and in love for the first time in his life, probably, and anything can happen. He's as likely to go hog wild as not. There's the only answer to this whole dirty mess for you, and remember it next time. When I was a young fellow like him, just starting to feel my oats, I rode down in the elevator one

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day with a girl who lived in the same apartment house. And by God—"

"What?" Rafferty put in, intrigued by such unexpected human frailty in Iron Mike. "You mean she was a real knockout, Inspector, like that Miss Sanderson?"

"Oh, I suppose," Iron Mike admitted, eyes still fixed on the old tarp under them. "But I can't even remember now what she looked like. I was just sixteen or seventeen, Rafferty, and there was the whiff of her perfume around me and the brush of her right arm against mine—half a second—when she was pressed back in the car by some other people. Now I'm a damned happily married man with a fine family—but however it was, whatever it was, all I can say—and only half a second, mind you—is that even now I find myself thinking of that damned woman almost every day of my life. Seventeen, Rafferty, is a very bad age. May God rest his poor silly boy's soul."

## DETECTIVERSE

*LETTER TO THE EDITOR*

*by CHARLES C. McWHORTER*

I was feeling unusually mean
Till the mail brought my *Ellery Queen.*
Then I lit up my pipe
And forgetting my gripe,
My world grew all bright and serene.

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*Are you familiar with greyhound racing? Have you ever bet on the dogs? No? Then you will learn some interesting things in this mystery with an unusual background—the dog track. Now, Captain Leopold knew his way around the track; he knew the professional gamblers and the hangers-on. But he had to know more than that to crack this tough case. In the end Leopold performs as neat a piece of detective work as you will come across in a year of racing seasons . . .*

# CAPTAIN LEOPOLD GOES TO THE DOGS

***by EDWARD D. HOCH***

Eddie Sargasso was a gambler.

In his younger days he'd been known to bet on everything from the fall of a card to the virtue of a woman. Now that he'd passed 40 he was more likely to limit his wagers to recognized sporting events and games of chance, but he was still always on the lookout for an angle. He'd been in on the recent jai alai fixes until a grand-jury investigation broke the scandal wide open. Now it was greyhound racing which took his fancy.

Eddie Sargasso was fortunate to live in one of the few northeastern states where dog racing was legal. If he'd resided elsewhere it wouldn't have stopped him from betting, but it would have kept him from arranging to meet Aaron Flake—by convenient accident—in the Sportsman's Lounge one Sunday evening in July.

Flake was a little man with thin blond hair and glasses that were too big for his face. He was sitting alone at the bar, nursing a gin

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and tonic, when Eddie slipped onto the stool next to him. "Hey, aren't you Aaron Flake, the guy from the dog track?"

The man smiled thinly. "I'm a licensed hare controller, if that's what you mean. You may have seen me at the track."

"Damn right," Eddie said, building it up. "You were pointed out to me as knowing more about greyhound racing than anyone in the state."

"After working at something for sixteen years I suppose it's natural that you learn some facts about it."

Eddie Sargasso whistled. "Sixteen years! It hasn't even been legal that long, has it?"

"I worked the Florida tracks before I came north. New England was a whole new territory for me and I figured to get in on the ground floor."

"You got a family here?"

Aaron Flake shook his head and took another sip of his drink. "Wife and kids stayed in Florida. They liked the sun. I'm divorced now."

"I do a little betting on the dogs," Eddie admitted.

"That's what we race 'em for."

"I like them better than horses because they're harder to fix, you know? You bet on a greyhound and you know it's going to be a good honest race."

"Well, there are ways of fixing them. Tampering with the dogs. I read a story once about dog racing in England and they had a dozen ways of making the dogs run faster, or slower, or whatever they wanted. We check 'em pretty careful over here, though."

Eddie signaled the bartender for two more drinks, and Flake offered no objection. It was a Sunday, after all, and he didn't have to work again till Monday night. "You control the mechanical rabbit, don't you?" Eddie asked, pretending an ignorance of the sport's basics. "How does that work?"

"I usually call it an artificial hare rather than a mechanical rabbit. There's nothing mechanical about it, really. It's a stuffed animal strapped to a device that moves around the track. It's powered by an electric motor and my job is to maintain just the correct speed for the hare. If it's too slow the lead dog might catch it, and if it's too fast and gets too far ahead of the dogs they lose interest. Judges have been known to declare a no-race if that happens."

"How many dogs are there?"

"We race eight at a time in this state. Some places race nine."

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"You can keep them all in view during the race?"

"Sure, it's not hard. I'm in a little booth overlooking the track."

"Which post position is best?"

"Number eight trap is on the outside of the oval, nearest the hare. That dog has to run a few more feet than the number one dog on the inside—but it's not enough to speak of. They usually bunch together after the start anyway. I wait till the hare's about twelve yards in front before I open the traps, and I try to maintain that distance. We have an electric-eye camera at the finish line to record the winner."

"Sure sounds exciting. I've only been a couple of times, but I think I'll drive out again tomorrow night."

Aaron Flake finished his drink. "You'll enjoy it," he said, sliding off the barstool. "See you around."

Flake had left suddenly but that didn't bother Eddie Sargasso too much. At least he'd made contact, and with any luck he'd fare better than Marie did. Eddie and his wife lived in an expensive colonial house at the edge of the city, not far from the dog track, and driving home that evening he went over the possibilities in his mind. Somehow he needed an edge on the race fixing so he could get his cut of it and still avoid problems with the law. He had a lengthy arrest record over the years, and he knew there were some cops in the city just waiting for a misstep to nail him.

"How'd you make out?" Marie asked as he entered the family room where she was watching television.

"Pretty good for the first meeting. If anyone knows when the fix is on it must be Flake. Watching the races that carefully every night he has to see something."

"I hope you do better than me. I couldn't get to first base with him. He never even phoned me!"

He bent over and kissed her. "Don't let it bother you. I guess he doesn't go much for the ladies. I thought you could talk to him about Florida but it didn't work out."

"Are we going to the track tomorrow night?"

"Sure. I told him I'd probably be there. We can use the old system till we latch onto something better."

Monday was a warm night and that brought out a good crowd. Marie wore her white pants suit and Eddie had on his lucky brown jacket. He studied the dogs through binoculars, watching them break from their numbered traps to pursue the motorized rabbit.

After the third race he ran into Donald Wayne of the state betting

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commission. "Eddie! They haven't barred you from the track yet, I see."

"Come on, Donald. I'm a solid citizen."

"Sure, I know. Do you still make bets on things like whether the next girl into a bar will be wearing slacks or a skirt?"

"That was in my younger days, and I lost too much money. Now I try to bet only on sure things."

"I know. That's why we hate to see you at the dog tracks. We've had enough trouble with jai alai in this state."

"Would you be suspicious of a poker game at my place on Friday night?"

"That's more like it! Close up, I can keep my eyes on you."

Eddie chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. "Make it eight o'clock. I'll see who else I can round up."

It had been more than a year since the weekly poker games with Wayne and a few others. Eddie stopped asking him when Wayne was appointed to the state betting commission, fearing it might somehow compromise his friend's position. But if Wayne didn't mind coming, why should Eddie?

He made a bet on the fourth race, buying his ticket from one of the totalizator operators in their distinctive dark red jackets. Then he stood for a time watching the odds change right up to post time. It was much like horse racing in that respect. There was always big money bet in the closing minute, and late changes to lower odds often indicated inside information on a winner. Often when Eddie saw that happening he sent Marie out to stand in line at one group of windows while he went to a different selling location. When the odds changed on the totalizator screen they'd each buy a $100 ticket on the horse whose odds showed a sudden last-minute drop.

He went back to his seat in time to see the greyhound wearing the bright blue racing jacket numbered six cross the finish line first. "There was last-minute betting on him," Eddie told his wife. "The smart boys are at it again."

"You want me to get in line for the next race?"

"I think so. Until we get more friendly with Mr. Flake that's the only move we've got." He passed her a $100 bill. "Watch the odds and be close enough so you can make a last-minute bet just before the machines lock."

"You don't have to tell me. I've done it a thousand times."

He watched her head for the downstairs bank of selling windows and he went back to the windows nearest their seats. As he stood

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watching the totalizator board, another familiar figure passed into his line of vision. It was Sam Barth, one of the track stewards. "Sam!" Eddie called out.

"How's it going? Where's your lovely wife?"

"Downstairs, Sam. How about a poker game Friday night? Donald's coming over."

"Wayne? That's great! I think I can make it, but not till I get out of here at eleven. That okay?"

"Fine. Come when you can, Sam."

He watched the slender man walk away, wondering vaguely if a track steward could be in on any fixing. Stranger things had happened.

He got into the shorter of the two lines then, hoping he was timing it right. "Hi, Eddie. How they running?"

He turned at the sound of the woman's voice and saw Joyce Train, a woman he'd known quite well in his younger days. "Joyce! Good to see you! How's the family?"

"Who knows?" She smiled and winked. "I'm back to work."

"You are? Since when?"

"The spring. I couldn't take being a housewife."

Eddie chewed at his lower lip. "I'll keep it in mind. I might have something for you."

"I'm at the old place if you need to reach me."

"Fine." She still had a great figure and she knew how to show it off, wearing a dark brown jumpsuit with some frills at the neck and cuffs. A few years ago she'd quit the call-girl business to get married, but hardly anyone had thought it would last. Apparently it hadn't.

Thinking about her, Eddie wondered if he might try introducing her to Aaron Flake.

The totalizator screen was changing. He memorized the current odds and watched them shift. Minor changes, mostly, at one minute to post time.

Except—

Dog number four dropped from eight-to-one to seven-to-two. That meant a big last-minute bet. He hoped Marie had caught it at the other windows.

"One hundred on number four," he told the ticket seller when he reached the window a few seconds later. He was just walking away when he heard the snap of the machines locking as the starter signaled the release of the hare. Then there was a roar from the crowd as the eight greyhounds burst from their numbered traps.

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He made it back to his seat in time to see them rounding the first curve of the oval track. The dogs were closing in on the electric rabbit, and the lead one looked to be almost within striking distance. He'd never seen them that close before. Maybe Flake—

The dogs were onto the rabbit, straining at their muzzles and sending up growls of frustration. Instantly the steward and judges were on the track, signaling it was a no-race. The message flashed on the tote board that all bets were off.

Eddie Sargasso couldn't figure it out. He met Marie by the steps and she was as baffled as he was. "What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know, but it'll probably cost Flake his job. We'll have to start all over with someone else."

They pushed their way through the crowd of disgruntled spectators, watching the trainers and track officials trying to bring some order from the confusion on the track. The dogs were growling and fighting among themselves, separating only reluctantly as the trainers pulled them apart.

The control booth for the hare was some distance away, near the starting gate, and by the time Eddie and Marie reached it he saw Donald Wayne coming out. His face was white as Eddie asked him, "What in hell happened?"

Wayne stared at him blankly, then seemed to recognize him and said, "Murder—that's what! Somebody stabbed Aaron Flake!"

Captain Leopold was not a gambler.

He'd been to the dog track once in his life, with Lieutenant Fletcher and his wife shortly after it opened. That night he'd managed to lose $12, enough to convince him he was no luckier with dogs than with horses. Now, as he pulled up to the main entrance with Fletcher at his side and the siren wailing, he wondered if he'd be any luckier this night.

"We should have gone home early," Fletcher decided, looking at the crowd of people. "Let the night shift handle it."

"Come on. Maybe it's an easy one—some drunk who's waiting to confess."

"Sure, Captain." Fletcher liked to use the title when he was being sarcastic. Most of the time they were good friends, and Leopold had been out to dinner at Fletcher's house twice so far during the summer. With Connie Trent away on vacation they'd been spending more hours together in the office too.

"This way, Captain," a voice called to him as they entered the

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stands. Leopold recognized Sam Barth, one of the track stewards whom he knew slightly. Barth stood at the top of a short flight of steps, wearing a dark red blazer like all the track personnel.

"What happened here?" Leopold asked. "The report said a homicide."

"That's it. Our hare operator, Aaron Flake, was stabbed in the back. It happened right during the race, and the dogs caught up with the hare!" That seemed to bother him more than the murder.

"All right, show us the way."

Leopold and Fletcher followed him to a little wooden booth overlooking the dog track. A husky man in a rumpled brown suit was there to greet them. "This is Donald Wayne of the state betting commission. He found the body," Barth said.

Leopold shook hands with Wayne and waited while the man opened the door of the control booth. Then he took a deep breath. The man they identified as Aaron Flake was slumped over in his chair, head down on the desk in front of him. Something—Leopold saw it was the evening's racing program—was pinned to his back with a bone-handled hunting knife.

"All right, Fletcher, get the photographer and the lab boys up here." Leopold glanced at the desk on which the body was slumped, and saw another racing program, an ashtray with one cigarette butt, some pencils, and a blank pad of paper. A pair of binoculars was mounted on a stand in front of the dead man's head.

He turned and looked at the door of the booth, observing a simple hook-and-eye latch. "Did he keep this door latched?"

Donald Wayne nodded. "It's something of an art, keeping that hare just the right distance ahead of the dogs. Flake didn't want anyone walking in during a race and ruining his concentration, so he kept the latch on. The door was unlocked when I found him, though."

"So he admitted his killer. It was someone he knew."

"Looks like it," Wayne agreed. "But that doesn't limit it very much. We have over fifty track employees, plus the owners and trainers of each dog. There are stewards, judges, a starter, a timekeeper, even a veterinary surgeon. Flake knew them all. Plus he might have admitted any one of the spectators that he knew."

"Make up a list of track employees for me," Leopold suggested. "And try to indicate where each one would have been during the race."

Sam Barth, the track steward, was standing outside the little

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booth. "I can probably do that better than Donald. I work with them. He was just a visitor tonight."

"How's that?" Leopold asked the stocky man.

"Well, I'm on the betting commission and I figure I should go around to the tracks once a week or so. We don't have thoroughbred racing in this state, but between the greyhounds and jai alai it keeps me busy."

"You were standing near this booth when it happened?"

"Not too far away," he told Leopold. "At first I couldn't believe my eyes! I've never seen the dogs catch the rabbit in all the years I've been coming here. It's something that just never happens! As soon as I realized something had gone wrong with Flake I hurried up here to the booth. But it was too late."

"Could you see the entrance from where you were standing?"

Barth shook his head. "You see the way these supporting girders stick out to hold the roof. There's a blind spot here so the door to the booth can't really be seen from the stands. Anyone could have entered without being seen."

While Fletcher made notes of the booth's measurements and other facts, and the medical examiner set about removing the knife from the wound, Leopold went down to the track with Sam Barth. "Never had anything like this happen, Captain. I still can't believe it!"

There was barking from a few frustrated dogs as Leopold walked along the edge of the track toward the kennels. One trainer was leading his muzzled greyhound for a trot around the exercise track. "Think we'll be able to finish the rest of the card, Sam?" he asked.

"Not a chance, Matt. They've scratched it all for tonight. We'll try to get another hare controller up from Stamford for tomorrow's card."

"No one seems to be mourning the dead man too much," Leopold observed.

"Aaron Flake was a loner. Stuck pretty much to himself. Behind his back they called him Flakey, of course. He probably had that all his life."

"Was he married?"

"He told people he was divorced but it may not have been true. He came up from the Florida tracks when we started dog racing here. There was some sort of trouble at his last track, but the state investigated and decided he wasn't involved."

"Trouble? Like fixed races?"

"No, something else. I don't know what."

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"Have there been any fixed races here?"

"I couldn't say, Captain."

"All right," Leopold said. "I'll talk to you later."

He'd ordered the gates closed shortly after his arrival, but of course the killer had had several minutes to make his escape before the Captain's arrival.

Leopold watched the progress of the lines without spotting any familiar faces, then went back to the booth where the medical examiner was just finishing. "What about the weapon?" Leopold asked.

"Standard sort of hunting knife. You can buy them at any sporting goods or department store. Five-inch blade, about nine inches overall. Perfect for hiding in pocket or purse."

"And the program skewered to the body?"

"Beats me! A message of some sort?" He closed his bag and followed the stretcher out.

Fletcher came up the steps from the lower section. "I spotted an old friend of ours in the crowd."

"Who's that?"

"Joyce Train. Used to be a call girl working out of the Harbor Motor Lodge. Remember?"

"How could I forget? She's back in the business, isn't she?"

"So I heard."

"Let's go talk to her," Leopold decided.

They'd been given the use of Sam Barth's private office under the grandstand for questioning, and Fletcher brought Joyce in there. "Hello, Joyce. Enjoying the races?"

"Leopold! So there's been a murder?"

He nodded. "Aaron Flake. Know him?"

"I know him by sight. He wasn't one of my customers, if that's what you mean."

"What can you tell us, Joyce?"

"Nothing. I was out here betting on the dogs like everyone else."

Fletcher perched himself on the edge of the desk. "In your line of work it's good to give the police tips once in a while."

"You're not the vice squad!"

"But they're right down the hall at headquarters. Come on, Joyce. Think hard and give us some information. Who had it in for Flake?"

"I don't know a thing, honest!"

Leopold tried a different approach. "You said he wasn't a customer, and he didn't have a wife on the scene. Any chance he was homosexual?"

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She shrugged. "Maybe. I saw him in bars with other men occasionally."

"How occasionally?"

"Last night."

"Who was the other man?"

She glanced away. "It was over at the Sportsman's Lounge. But it wasn't anything like that. This other guy's no queer."

"Suppose you let us decide that. Who was it?"

Joyce Train bit her lip and stalled for time. Leopold knew she would tell them the name, but she wanted to make it look like a difficult decision. "All right," she said finally. "It was Eddie Sargasso, the gambler."

"Sargasso!" Fletcher gave a low whistle. "Man, I'd like to hang something on him!"

"He's here tonight," Joyce added in a low voice.

"Here? At the track?"

She nodded. "You won't say it was me that told, will you?"

"Not unless we have to bring it out in court," Leopold promised. "He didn't see you at the Lounge last night?"

"No. I was in a booth with a—a friend."

"Thanks, Joyce. You've been a big help. We'll remember it." He turned to Fletcher. "Let's go find Eddie Sargasso before he gets away."

Eddie was standing in line with Marie, only three away from the officer taking down names and addresses of the personnel, when Leopold spotted him. He smiled and stuck out his hand. "Captain Leopold! This is a real pleasure!"

"Would you step into the office and have a word with us, Eddie? Your wife too?"

"And lose my place in line?" he asked with a try at lightness.

"You won't have to wait in line," Leopold assured him.

Eddie and Marie followed Leopold into a little office under the grandstand. He knew it belonged to Sam Barth, and wondered where the steward was.

"Now what's on your mind, Captain?"

"The murder of Aaron Flake."

"Terrible thing! Any idea who did it?"

"That's what we're working on. How well did you know him?"

The office door opened and Lieutenant Fletcher came in. That didn't surprise Eddie. He knew Leopold and Fletcher worked to-

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gether. "Hardly at all," he answered. "I hardly knew him."

"You were having a drink with him last night in the Sportsman's Lounge downtown."

"Yeah? Hey, I guess that's right! Just happened to see him in there. That's the first time we ever talked, you know?"

"You're a gambler, Eddie, the sort who likes to gamble on sure things. There've been some shady races run at this track lately. Not the sort of thing you'd want to gamble on unless you had inside information."

"How do you fix a dog race?"

"That's what I'm asking you. Maybe you do it by bribing the hare operator."

"Not a chance! You saw what happened if the hare isn't controlled just right. The dogs catch it, and there's no race. Those guys aren't licensed because they might be crooks. They're licensed because it takes a certain skill to run the hare at the proper distance from the dogs."

"I don't need any instructions on dog racing," Leopold said. "Suppose you tell me what you and Flake talked about."

"Nothing, I swear! Just barroom chat, that's all."

Leopold turned to Marie. "Were you with your husband at the time of the killing?"

She glanced sideways at Eddie and his heart skipped a beat. They were really out to hang this on him! If only Marie would say the right—

"Not the exact instant," Marie admitted, and his hopes died. "I came up from the lower ticket window just after the race was stopped."

"She was placing a last-minute bet for me," Eddie explained.

"And what were you doing?"

"I was placing a bet too." He knew it sounded foolish, so he explained. "Sometimes people with inside information wait till the last minute to place big bets, so it doesn't cause a run on a certain dog and lower the odds too much. I watch the tote board and if I see a drop in odds during the final minute before a race I usually put a hundred on the dog. The same thing holds with horses. It's just smart betting."

"It's smart betting if you suspect something crooked."

"Well, yeah."

"Why wasn't your wife with you?"

"Sometimes you figure the length of the line wrong and get shut

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out when the machines lock. I figured with Marie and me in separate lines, at least one of us would make it to the windows in time."

"Did anyone see you there?"

He remembered Joyce. "Girl I know—Joyce Train. I saw her in line just before the board changed."

"But she didn't see you after the race started?"

"Well, no. I was on my way back to our seats."

Fletcher picked that moment to lean across to Leopold and hand him something. It looked to Eddie like an address book. "This was in the dead man's pocket, Captain."

Leopold studied the entry Fletcher had indicated, then passed it along to Eddie. "What do you make of this?"

*Marie S.*, it read, followed by a phone number. Eddie moistened his lips and said, "I don't know."

"Is that your number?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

He turned to Marie. "Mrs. Sargasso, do you have any explanation as to why the dead man had your name and phone number in his address book?"

"I—"

"Shut up, Marie!" Eddie barked.

Leopold leaned forward. "This is murder, Sargasso! And right now you're our prime suspect. You'd better let her talk."

Marie looked at him. "Eddie, we have to tell them what we know."

"Yeah," he agreed reluctantly. "I suppose so."

"Eddie wanted me to meet Flake and strike up an acquaintance. He knew there was something crooked going on at the track and we figured he'd be a good one to know about it. We'd seen him drinking alone at the bars around town, and I gave it a try, but I didn't get anywhere. I told him my name was Marie Sullivan and he wrote it down, but he never called me."

"How long ago was this?"

"Back in June, about a month ago."

"So last night I tried it," Eddie said. "I figured if he didn't like girls maybe I'd have better luck just chatting with him over a few drinks. But nothing came of it."

"Something came of it," Leopold corrected him. "Aaron Flake was murdered."

"I don't know a thing about that."

Suddenly Marie had a thought. "Eddie, the tickets! We didn't cash them in yet. We've still got them!"

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He saw at once what she was driving at. It just might be enough to save their skins. "That's right! The lines were so long we decided to wait till tomorrow night to get our refunds for the canceled race. I've got my hundred-dollar ticket on number four, and you can check the totalizator records to see that the odds on number four took a big drop in the final minute before the race. That was our signal to buy. You got your ticket, Marie?"

She nodded and dug around in her purse, finally producing it. Leopold took the tickets and studied them. "These were bought just before the race?"

"Less than a minute before. We didn't know which dog to bet on before that. And Flake was killed less than a minute into the race."

"I'll agree with that," Leopold said. "There's no way he could have run that rabbit with the knife in his back. It killed him almost instantly."

"Well there! I couldn't have gotten from the ticket window to that booth in anything like two minutes. It's impossible!"

Leopold frowned and said, "Time it, Fletcher." He glanced at Marie. "Where did you buy your tickets?"

"Downstairs."

"Time it from where she was, too. And see if there's a ticket seller closer to Flake's booth."

"Right, Captain."

"Those are the only two grandstand banks of windows," Eddie said. "There's another in the clubhouse, but that's way down at the other end. Besides, this number on the ticket identifies the machine that sold it."

Leopold nodded. "We'll see what Fletcher reports."

Eddie used the few minutes for chatter about the track, and about gambling in general. "There was a time when I'd bet on anything, Captain."

"Want to make a bet on whether I solve this case?"

"I might," Eddie answered carefully.

Fletcher came back shaking his head. "Looks like they're both in the clear, Captain. A fast walk from the upper windows to the booth took me two minutes and twenty-eight seconds. With the crowd here it would have been closer to three minutes. From downstairs where Marie bought her ticket it's even further—two minutes and forty-five seconds. They couldn't have bought these tickets and still gotten up to the booth in time to stab Flake."

Leopold sighed. "All right, you can go now."

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Eddie got to his feet. "I'll lay two-to-one you don't crack this case, Captain."

"I'm not a betting man."

"That's too bad."

After they'd gone Leopold and Fletcher went back to the kennel area, walking beneath the lights past row after row of barking dogs. "They're restless," he told Fletcher. "Unhappy, like me."

"You still think Sargasso's guilty, don't you?"

"He's a two-bit gambler who never did an honest day's work in his life. But we can't get a murder conviction on those grounds."

Up ahead they saw the man from the betting commission and Leopold called to him. "Mr. Wayne, do you have a minute?"

Donald Wayne turned and waited for them to catch up. "Just talking to a few of the owners about what happened," he said.

"Do they have any information?"

"Nothing. No one can imagine Flake having an enemy. He was such a quiet guy."

"How about friends? Did he have any of those?"

"Not many, according to Sam Barth. He knew Flake better than I did, certainly."

"What's going on at this track?" Leopold asked. "They've been fixing races, haven't they?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"Eddie Sargasso told me a lot of money was being bet on certain dogs just before post time. And those dogs usually won."

"I wish he'd make his accusations to me."

"You a friend of Eddie's?"

Donald Wayne nodded. "From the old days, before I was on the betting commission. We used to play poker together."

"But not any more?"

"Matter of fact, he invited me over for a game on Friday night. Don't know if I'll be going now."

"Who else was at these games?"

"Sam Barth, sometimes."

"Mr. Wayne, if there was a fix in at this track, how could it be worked?"

"Oh, lots of ways. They run twelve races a night with eight dogs per race. That's nearly a hundred dogs each night. Of course most dogs race every evening, and travel a circuit through the three New England states that have dog tracks. The owners get to know one

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another. Sometimes they get to know each other so well that a group of them will get together and take turns winning. The other owners or trainers hold back their dogs by various methods and one man wins. Then it's someone else's turn."

"Is that going on here?"

"To some extent." He spread his hands. "To some extent it probably happens at race tracks—especially harness tracks—too. But that doesn't mean it led to Aaron Flake's death. He wouldn't have been a party to it."

"Except that he's watching the race very carefully through binoculars, every foot of the way. He knows the way greyhounds run, and he recognizes it when they're running different—either too fast or too slow. He could have been blackmailing somebody."

"Yes, I suppose so. But who'd be foolish enough to kill him like that, in the middle of a race? A blackmail victim would more likely choose a dark street after the race, when there was less chance of discovery."

"That's true," Leopold agreed. "It's almost as if the killer *had* to do it during the race."

"And leave that program pinned to his back with the knife," Fletcher reminded them. "If you ask me it's some nut with a grudge against dog tracks."

"Except that Flake unlatched the door for this person."

"Couldn't the latch have been flipped from outside with a piece of plastic or a credit card?" Wayne suggested.

Fletcher shook his head. "I tried that. There's a strip of wood around the jamb that prevents it."

Sam Barth came hurrying up from the direction of the grandstand. "I've been looking for you, Captain. Here's that list of track personnel you requested. Any one of them could have gained admission to the booth."

Leopold glanced at the typewritten sheets. "I think we can rule out the ticket sellers and gate personnel. And any security guards with fixed posts. Likewise the judges, the paddock steward, the starter, and the timekeeper. None of these people could have left their positions during the race. That still leaves stewards like yourself, plus most of the owners and trainers, the veterinarian, and others."

"Plus Flake's friends."

"Yes, if he had any." Leopold was staring up at the grandstand, where the lights were beginning to go out.

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"What are you thinking, Captain?" Fletcher asked.

"I'm thinking we should come back here tomorrow night."

Leopold spent much of the following day on the phone to the Florida police. When he'd finished, he thought he had the beginnings of an idea.

"Look here, Fletcher—Aaron Flake once worked at a dog track in Miami where an owner was knifed to death in his trailer."

"The same sort of weapon."

"Exactly. It's just possible that Flake was a blackmailer after all—but blackmailing a murderer instead of a race fixer."

"That still doesn't tell us who did it."

"Were there any fingerprints on the knife or the program?"

Fletcher shook his head. "Wiped clean."

"Blackmail or not, the killer still risked a great deal stabbing Flake during the race, when he knew people would rush to the booth to see what was wrong."

Fletcher brought in two cups of coffee from the temperamental machine in the hall. "Any chance the lever controlling the rabbit could have been turned on automatically, after the killer left the booth?"

"None at all. The starter signaled Flake to release the rabbit. He had to be alive then, even if the killer was standing right behind him in the booth."

Fletcher set the coffee cup on a square piece of cardboard that Leopold used as a coaster. Leopold stared at it in silence for a moment and then said, "You did that to protect the desk, in case the coffee spilled."

"What?"

"Just thinking out loud, Fletcher. I've got an idea who killed Aaron Flake, and I know how we can prove it at the track tonight."

News of the murder had obviously not hurt the dog track's business. By the time Leopold and Fletcher arrived, shortly after the gates opened, lines of people were pouring in.

"Curiosity seekers," Sam Barth said, standing in his red jacket just inside the entrance. "By next week they'll be onto something else."

"Have you seen Eddie Sargasso yet?" Leopold asked.

"Not yet, but he'll be here."

Leopold sent Fletcher to cover the lower-level ticket windows while he took the upstairs ones himself. Sargasso hadn't gone to the

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clubhouse the previous night, so he probably wouldn't go there tonight. It was just a matter of waiting.

"Looking for killers?" someone asked. It was Joyce Train, with a man the Captain didn't know.

"That's right," Leopold said. "I read somewhere they always return to the scene of the crime."

He chatted with her a moment and then glanced back at the lines. Eddie Sargasso was there, with his wife right behind him. Leopold hurried over, edging through the thickening crowd.

"Hello, Captain," Eddie said. "Break the case yet?"

"Just about."

Eddie reached the window and pushed a ticket through. "We're cashing in our tickets on the canceled race last night," he explained.

"I know," Leopold said.

Eddie took his $100 and stepped aside. Then, acting as fast as he could, Leopold's hand shot out to grip Marie Sargasso's wrist. "Not so fast, Marie. I want to see that."

Eddie made a move toward Leopold. "What in hell are you doing?"

"You may not know it, Eddie, but it was your wife who murdered Aaron Flake, and the proof of it is here in her hand."

"You're crazy!" Sargasso growled. "Marie, tell him he's crazy!"

But the life seemed to have gone out of her. "It's true, Eddie," she said simply. "I killed him."

Later, in Sam Barth's office under the grandstand, Leopold explained. "These tickets were the key to it," he said, fanning eight tickets on the previous night's race across the desk. "Marie's alibi, like her husband's, rested on the fact that she was in line, waiting for the odds to change so she could make a last-minute bet on a certain dog. And sure enough, she and Eddie each produced a ticket on the number four entry. Fletcher timed it and verified they couldn't have bought the tickets and still reached the booth in time to stab Flake."

"So how'd she do it?" Barth asked.

"Simply by purchasing one ticket on each of the eight dogs in the race, as soon as she went downstairs. This gave her time to reach the booth and kill Flake, and still hold a hundred-dollar ticket on whichever dog showed that last-minute odds change. Sure, it cost her eight hundred dollars, but she knew better than anyone else the race would never be completed. She knew she could get her money back on the tickets last night or today. I heard Eddie say they'd do

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it today because the lines were too long last night. Of course Eddie had no idea his wife was guilty. That was the main reason for her elaborate scheme. Most other people might have killed Flake in an alley, but Marie had to do it in such a way that she'd have a perfect alibi—not only for the police but for her husband!"

"But why did she kill him?" Sam Barth asked.

"We're digging into that. We think Marie killed a man at a Florida dog track years ago and got away with it. Eddie sent her to make Flake's acquaintance as part of their scheme to get inside dope on the fixed races. Flake recognized her from Florida and had some sort of knowledge connecting her with the prior killing. When he tried to blackmail her, she decided to kill him. She knew Eddie usually sent her to buy a last-minute ticket on the races, and she used that as her alibi. She went to the booth, pretending she had a blackmail payment for Flake, and he let her in. While his back was turned controlling the hare, she took the knife from her purse and stabbed him."

"Through the program?" Fletcher asked.

"I saw that coaster under my coffee cup today and I got the idea, Fletcher. The knife blade was sticking through the program when she stabbed him, so it would act as a shield against possible bloodstains. That was the only likely explanation.

"So what did we know? The killer was someone Flake knew—either as a co-worker or an acquaintance. The killer found it necessary to murder Flake during the dog race, even with the risk involved. And the killer had to take great care to avoid even a speck of blood. Whom did that point to?"

"Couldn't it have been Sargasso as well as his wife?"

"Not likely. Eddie was wearing a dark brown jacket yesterday, remember? Likewise, Sam here and all the other track personnel wear dark red blazers. Even Donald Wayne had on a rumpled brown suit, and I think that girl Joyce wore brown too. Dark brown or dark red wouldn't likely show a bloodstain that obviously—not so the killer would find it necessary to use that program trick. But Marie Sargasso was wearing what?—a white pants suit! Even a speck of blood would have been fatal to her."

"There must have been a thousand other women at the track wearing white or light summer colors," Fletcher protested.

"But their names and phone numbers weren't in Flake's address book. And they weren't from Florida as Marie was."

"Why'd she wear white if she was planning the murder?"

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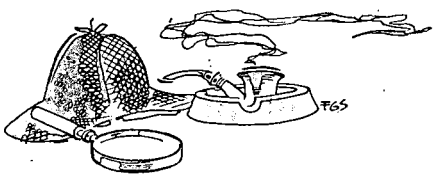
Leopold shrugged. "Maybe Eddie liked it on her, and she couldn't attract his suspicion by refusing to wear it. The important thing was that she avoided any blood splattering from the wound by using the program as a guard."

Eddie Sargasso rode down to headquarters in the car with his wife and Leopold. She was silent and her head was bowed. Eddie held her hand all the way, and at one point he said, "You should have taken my bet, Leopold. You solved the case."

"I told you I wasn't a gambler."

"You gambled that she'd break down and confess. You had no real evidence against her."

Leopold thought about it and said, "I suppose there are different sorts of gambling, Eddie. When you put it that way, maybe we're not so different after all."



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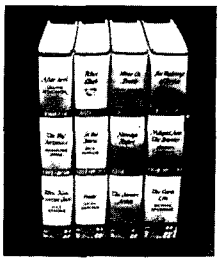

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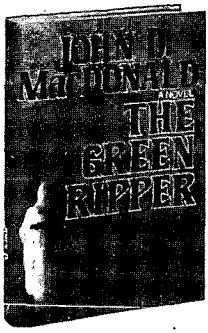


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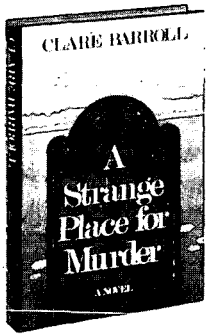


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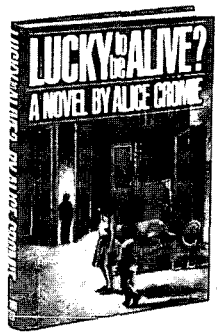


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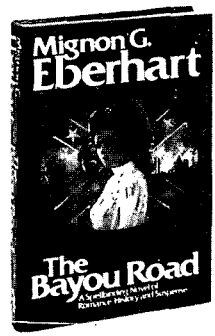


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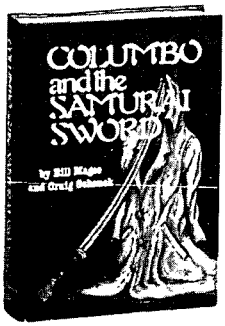


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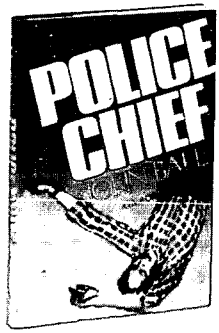


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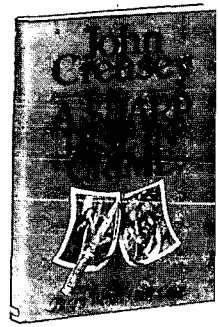

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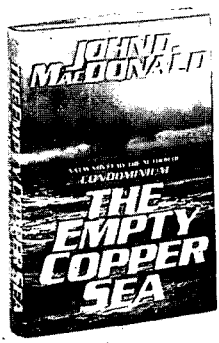


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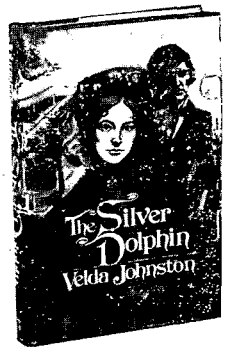


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